

# **RECONCEPTUALISING RESILIENCE: A GUIDE TO THEORY AND PRACTICE**

by

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### **Declaration**

I declare that **RECONCEPTUALISING RESILIENCE: A GUIDE TO THEORY AND PRACTICE** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Penny Kokot Louw', written over a horizontal line.

**PENNY KOKOT LOUW**

**NOVEMBER 1999**

*For my ally and my soul's strength, Taya*

In the depth of winter  
I finally learned  
that there was in me  
an invincible summer

– *Albert Camus*  
*Lyrical and Critical Essays*

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## **SUMMARY**

How people survive and thrive through adversity is a question which has prompted much research. There is little agreement on the definition of resilience beyond the basic idea of “bouncing back”, resulting in many studies which offer contradictory and confusing information. This study sought to organise the literature into broad conceptual categories, and attempted to explain some of the differences in definitions and research methods at the level of paradigm. A need to reconceptualise resilience was identified and undertaken in view of input from ecosystemic, cybernetic and postmodern paradigms. Attention was given especially to the role of language, meaning and description, and the role of the observer/researcher in such a reconceptualisation. Guidelines were offered for approaching research in future. Finally, the context of the researcher was examined in an attempt at self-reflexivity as part of the process of research as proposed in the reconceptualisation.

## **Key Terms**

Resilience; conceptual study; ecosystemic approach; postmodernism; qualitative research; self-reflexivity; family therapy.

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Thank you, Mom, for teaching me about resilience and writing, in more ways that you can know. Your critical reading skills and invaluable help in refining and editing the manuscript, too, are much appreciated!

Thank you, Dad, for suppers which restored the soul and saved us from tearing our hair out when it all got too much.

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Thank you, Ricky, for refusing to tell me what to do or how to do it (even when I begged).  
I could not have asked for a better teacher.

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The Author

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***PART I***

***RECONCEPTUALISING RESILIENCE***

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION

*What are the silken threads that hold a web of hope in a gale of hate? How is good salvaged from evil?*

— Gina O’Connell Higgins

Resilient adults: Overcoming a cruel past

### Introduction

What is it that permits some people to overcome brutal hardships to become strong, capable and happy, while others are left crushed and haunted? How does it happen that cruel events in our lives transform some of us and irreparably damage others? It is the concept of resilience that seeks to answer such provocative and — in the social sciences — significant questions.

These questions — the question of people’s amazing resilience — is one that has fascinated students of human behaviour. With its positive emphasis on upliftment and hope, and its focus on the achievements and successes of people, the study of resilience is striking in a scientific community which is preoccupied with illness, pathology and maladjustment.

It was this emphasis on hope and health that attracted me to the study of resilience. I began to read people’s personal accounts of victory over adversity, to think about how resilience was perhaps a theme in my own life and the life of my family, and to wonder about how the idea of resilience could be a useful one in my therapeutic conversations with clients and patients. At the same time, however, I was being confronted in my training with the revelations of various schools of thinking, primarily in the family therapy field, which led me to question the ways in which we acquire and use knowledge. I thus chose to combine these interests in a study of resilience that focuses on our ways of thinking about, or conceptualising, this intriguing concept.

## **Research Focus**

The construct resilience can be loosely defined as the process whereby people bounce back from adversity and go on with their lives (Jacelon, 1997). However, beyond this basic definition, opinions regarding the nature and process of resilience differ broadly.

Researchers have defined resilience as a trait (Wagnild & Young, 1993), an aspect of personality (Low, 1996), a process (Freiberg, 1993) and an articulation of capacities and knowledge (Saleebey, 1996). A few conceptualise resilience as an interpersonal, systemic concept (Butler, 1997; Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993a; Walsh, 1996), although it is only very recently that a more comprehensive formulation of resilience along these lines has been made (see, for example, Cross, 1998; Walsh 1998). The differences in conceptualisations have led to vastly different conclusions about what resilience is and how it can be fostered (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993a). In fact, Hayes (1992), in discussing studies relating to risk (which pervade the field of resilience research), attacks such studies for their conceptual incoherence. Moreover, it is very difficult to translate these conceptualisations of resilience into operational definitions (Kinard, 1998). Since (predominantly intrapsychic) definitions and the conceptual frameworks that accompany them shape empirical work, the results of the mainly quantitative research that has been done are unsatisfactory, both in terms of providing a sound conceptual base as a point of departure for resilience studies, and in terms of alternative paradigms such as cybernetics and postmodernism.

Such research is further confounded by the diverging operational definitions that necessarily direct quantitative inquiry: the abstract nature of the concept and the difficulties of empirically testing this idea has resulted in a proliferation of confusing and sometimes irreconcilable results. Furthermore, since few studies may be effectively generalised (for the abovementioned reasons), it would appear that the type of research done to date and the current conceptualisations of resilience remain limited. Studies largely seem to have focussed on prediction and the establishment of tools and indices for “measuring” resilience (Low, 1996), which, while useful in limited ways, do not necessarily promote a comprehensive understanding of this concept which may be applied in settings not related to pure research, such as psychotherapy. Most research on resilience to date has focussed on individuals (Baron,

Eisman, Scuello, Veyzer & Lieberman, 1996; Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993a; Richters & Martinez, 1993); and while documented interest exists in the resilience of communities and ethnographic groups (Elsass, 1992), studies have only very recently started to explore this area in any depth (see, for example, McCubbin & Thompson, 1998; Sonn & Fisher, 1998). In addition to the dearth of qualitative studies on the subject, the result of all the above is that the descriptions of a potentially rich field are, for all the hundreds of publications on the subject, remarkably thin.

Further difficulties lie in the use of criteria associated with the resilience of people. Protective factors (Kaplan, Turner, Norman & Stillson, 1996), risk factors (see, among others, Garmezy, 1991), generative factors (Saleebey, 1996), as well as the range and degree of all of these become complicated details in the design of research studies. Kinard (1998), Cicchetti and Garmezy (1993a) and Hayes (1992) are among the authors who advocate caution in interpreting studies dealing with such factors and question the validity of such studies.

It will be suggested that existing research has become trapped in the reification of unmeasurable concepts: Keeney (1983) warns us against substituting artificially constructed entities (eg, “intervention”, “symptom”) for patterns and forms which cannot be quantified and cannot be studied objectively as though they were “things” subject to physical rules. The lack of conclusive data and the failure of much of the literature to provide us with clear-cut information suggests that researchers might be going about their investigation in the wrong way, or in a one-sided fashion only. Research which approaches the complexity and intangible nature of resilience within the context of people’s lives may provide us with another perspective which could prove far more valuable in enabling us to help people than approaches thus far have done. The possibilities of such an approach will be examined in this dissertation.

A pervasive idea, put forward by philosophers, social constructionists, phenomenologists, narrative therapists and others (eg, Efran, Lukens & Lukens, 1990; Frankl, 1966; Keeney, 1983; May, Angel & Ellenberger, 1958; White, 1989; etc) is that the world is an experiential one, constructed through our own meanings. This is fundamental to an understanding of people’s experiences of their own and others’ resilience. This applies not only to our study of how people conceive of their own resilience, but equally to our role as researchers and students

of resilience and the assumptions and biases we bring into our field of enquiry. This notion is vital to a different conception of this construct, and could provide valuable insights which may guide the theory and practice of both researchers and practitioners in this field.

It seems that a need exists for a new conceptualisation of resilience which attempts to resolve some of the confusion in the field. Hayes (1992, p.406) stresses the need for researchers to scrutinise the social sciences, which “will help us maximize the levels of conceptual coherence we are capable of reaching...”. The primary aim of this study, therefore, is to propose such a reconceptualisation of resilience in the hope of achieving some small measure of conceptual coherence, and to suggest ways in which researchers and practitioners may continue to inquire about resilience in future studies.

### **Related Terms**

The enquiry into the nature of people’s survival is broad, and uses many terms in this process. I have chosen to use the term “resilience” in this study for a number of reasons. Constructs such as *adjustment* or *adaptation* are terms closely related to resilience and are often found in studies dealing with people or systems that could be construed as resilient. However, these terms do not adequately describe the complex nature of people’s strengths and ability to deal effectively with adversity. Studies dealing with *coping*, especially coping with stress, are further sources of information on resilience. The term “coping” has generated significant studies in its own right, and reflects an important aspect of resilience; nevertheless, it cannot explain the regenerative quality associated with the latter. Although adjusting, adapting and coping are all an intrinsic part of the notion of resilience, none of these constructs on their own can be substituted for a concept which embraces the notion of **bouncing back** from adversity. Another term commonly found in the literature relating to resilience is *hardiness*, which has been used interchangeably with resilience. Although this seems to be generally accepted, it could be suggested that hardiness, in concordance with terms such as *fortitude* and *strength*, refers rather to a state of resistance to trauma. Just as hardy plants are able to resist and not be harmed by adverse weather conditions, so hardy people could be considered as ‘invulnerable’ to risk. However, resilience does not imply imperviousness to risk, but rather conveys a sense of recovering after being bent or “psychologically stretched” (Rak

& Patterson, 1996, p.368). The idea of being “bent” or “stretched” implies being affected in some way by the significant event. Furthermore, the nature of this effect is of primary importance to any study of people which embraces the meanings which they attach to their situation, and cannot therefore be ignored; resilient people cannot be dismissed, as they sometimes have been, as invulnerable, stress resistant or superkids (Rak & Patterson, 1996). For this reason, the term *thriving*, which has recently become popular in the literature on resilience, may result in an underestimation of the pain and suffering experienced by resilient people, and a neglect of their very real struggle in the face of overwhelming odds.

### **Research Procedures and Methodology**

The aims of this study may be summarised as follows:

- to explore some of the confusion and conflicting conceptualisations of resilience which abound in this field and identify the processes underlying such confusion
- to provide a limited survey of the field of resilience research as a basis for a reconceptualisation of resilience
- to examine possible alternative approaches to resilience from cybernetic, ecosystemic and postmodern paradigms
- to propose a reconceptualisation of resilience according to the principles that proceed from an analysis of the literature and theory
- to illustrate some of the principles emanating from a reconceptualisation of resilience

In order to realise these aims, this conceptual study will include

- a literature survey of some of the most common conceptualisations of resilience in the field of psychology (and other social sciences), which will also provide a limited overview of some of the major developments in the field of resilience research
- a discussion of some of the problems relating to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of theory and research in the field



- a brief analysis of various cybernetic, ecosystemic and postmodern approaches which may be applied to the concept and study of resilience
- a proposal of how resilience may be reconceptualised, together with guidelines for the further study of this concept
- a reflection on the process of this research study and the context of the researcher, in line with the principle of maintaining a metaview and including the role of the observer

The structure of the dissertation takes various forms throughout. For example, I have included (primarily for the sake of clarity of thought) a number of dialogues. These sometimes take the form of a metalogue and sometimes the form of the traditional Aristotlean student-master dialectic, which allow both a clearer exposition of theoretical ideas and a metaview on the process of research itself.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE SURVEY: RESILIENCE UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

*I fear it will always be as if we are walking on infirm or swampy ground and this is good because if the ground were firm, we'd have no reason to go anywhere.*

— Charles Peirce  
Collected Papers

#### Introduction: A Metaphor for Research

Resilience is a word that has fascinated students of human behaviour. The promise it holds for making a success of life is seductive; and theorists, researchers and therapists have searched for an understanding of resilience, choosing various techniques, methods and definitions to achieve this. This chapter aims to explore the paths taken by researchers in their quest for knowledge, and to comment on the journeys made and the roads taken. In this way, we will hopefully come to some insights regarding the state of a number of resilience studies to date, and some guidelines as to which road we should take in following chapters, on our own quest to find new pathways to understanding resilience.

\* \* \*

*Researcher:* Before we continue, I would like to ask what is meant by the metaphor of paths or roads: you mean there are different ways to seek understanding of a concept?

*Family therapist:* The answer to that question should become apparent in the course of this chapter. But to give you a map of the journey of this chapter, maybe I could remind you that research is always done through the framework of a particular paradigm. The results we find are determined

by the measures used — as Efran et al. (1990) remind us, the question determines the answer.

*Researcher:* You suggest that we keep this in mind in reading this chapter. I presume then that the information presented here reflects certain assumptions — the paradigmatic biases that researchers hold — and should be read in light of this.

*Family therapist:* Exactly. At the end of the chapter we will look back and reflect on those biases, but in order to present the existing literature in a coherent, comprehensive yet manageable way, the reader will become immersed — for the time being anyway — in the paradigm projected by the researchers and the theories presented.

*Researcher:* This in itself might be an interesting experience for the reader, since in this way, he or she may come to their own conclusions about the type of knowledge that the roads explored here lead to.

\* \* \*

### **Conceptualisations of Resilience: So What Are We Looking For Anyway?**

Most researchers agree on a broad definition of resilience as being the ability to bounce back from adversity (eg, Jacelon, 1997; Wolin & Wolin, 1993), and has also been described as the capacity for successful adaptation, positive functioning, or competence (Egeland, Carlson & Sroufe, 1993). However, beyond this broad definition, the study of resilience thus far has been riddled with problems. Butler (1997, p.25) states that “resilience is still loosely enough defined to cover a multitude of virtues and cause an array of arguments”. To some extent, these problems are related to the varying conceptualisations of resilience which exist and which consequently confound the operationalisation of the construct, affecting how ideas of resilience are applied to research and the extent to which research results may be applied to various settings.

Cicchetti and Garmezy (1993a) state that definitions of resilience range from the absence of pathology in the child of a mentally ill parent to the recovery of function in a brain-injured patient. They further state that the variety of definitions generates contrasting pictures of both competent adaptation and estimates of risk in different populations, adding that either a broad or narrow definition results in vastly different conclusions. Beardlee (in Miller, 1996) supports this assertion in stating that there is no agreement on a definition. Even this short description of various researchers' views reveals the conflicts inherent in the definition of this construct. Lyons (1991, p.105) comments on the "striking lack of concordance among measures" and warns that the literature in this area, without direction by conceptual models of resilience, may become increasingly fragmented.

Despite the myriad opinions on the subject, however, certain trends in the conceptualisation of resilience may be identified. I have chosen to group these trends in terms of how resilience is conceptualised by researchers: for example, as a personality trait, process, developmental or systemic phenomenon. This distinction no doubt contains overlaps and omissions, and is, in some sense, an arbitrary one. Nonetheless, it has been chosen for the purposes of clarity and in an attempt to classify and eventually reconceptualise resilience. In addition to a discussion of the literature, some attention will be given to the assumptions underlying such perspectives in terms of the paradigms that each view represents.

### Resilience as a Trait or Innate Ability

Several researchers (eg, Low, 1996; Wagnild & Young, 1993) see resilience as an intrinsic ability or aspect of personality that moderates the negative effects of situations. Kobasa and Puccetti (in Baron et al., 1996) see an ability to cope with stress as an important intrinsic personality variable. Freiberg (1993) reports that most of the literature on resilience views this construct from an individual perspective as "positive individual responses to adverse conditions" (Freiberg, 1993, p.365). Flach (1988) takes such a definition further in asserting that resilience lies in the ability to experience fully the painful disorganisation and emotional tumult created by crisis. He adds to the idea of "bouncing back" as something innate by suggesting that this ability empowers people to achieve a higher level of personal integration and find a deeper appreciation of the values that guide their lives. Valentine and Feinauer

(1993) express a similar sentiment in their view that resilience is the ability to overcome adversity, survive stress and rise above disadvantage — the commonality being the idea that the person grows through the painful experience. The notion of growth is echoed by Carver (1998). This author further defines resilience (he uses the term “thriving”) as “decreased reactivity to subsequent stressors, faster recovery from subsequent stressors, or a consistently higher level of functioning” (Carver, 1998, p.245).

Dugan and Coles (1989) consider resilience to be a multidimensional construct or capacity that is made up of a pattern of related abilities which permits people to be active, persistent and flexible in applying a variety of skills and strategies across a range of situations and problems. This definition thus sees resilience as more than merely the capacity to recover from adversity. It also suggests that resilience is something that develops, rather than something which is merely present in certain (or even all) people. This view therefore ties in with the lifespan perspective (see below), yet still focuses on the role of the individual in the evolution of resilience.

Garmezy (in Miller, 1996) believes that the central element in the study of resilience lies in the power of recovery and in the ability to return to patterns of adaptation and competence. Unlike the conceptualisations mentioned above, this view does not emphasise the generative power of this construct, but rather refers to the regaining of a previous level of stability. This is closely related to the views of researchers who define resilience by what it is not - in other words, by the absence of pathology or maladaptive behaviour where the circumstances might otherwise suggest it (Miller, 1996). However, this definition has come under fire from, among others, Himelin and McElrath (1996) and Lyons (1991), who aver that resilience is far more than the mere absence of pathology. Nevertheless, evaluating individuals in terms of the absence/presence of pathology remains a popular measure of resilience, no doubt due at least in part to the difficulties inherent in operationalising this construct. These difficulties will be addressed further on.

Another view is proposed by Miller (1988), who suggests that it is a combination of body chemistry and personality factors which predisposes individuals to resilience. This notion shares with previous conceptualisations the assumption that resilience is an individual phenomenon, inherent to certain (or even all) people.

Although researchers have compiled numerous lists of personality traits that they claim to be present in the resilient personality (see, for example, Masten, Hubbard, Gest, Tellegen, Garmezy & Ramirez, 1999; Rak & Patterson, 1996), these do not appear to satisfy the demand for an explanation of this phenomenon, especially in light of the view that the whole is not equal to a sum of its parts. Another question concerns itself with where these personality traits originate; and it is the process, developmental and systemic views of resilience that address this issue.

### Resilience as a Process

Resilience is described by Flach (in Jacelon, 1997) as a dynamic process which can be learned at any given point in life. Freiberg (1993) defines resilience as a multifaceted process by which people draw on the best that they find in their environment. This researcher adds that resilience may thus be drawn from the family, school and community. Cicchetti and Schneider-Rosen (1986) develop this idea in their view of resilient functioning as being in dynamic transaction with intra- and extraorganismic forces; it is therefore not a static trait. Cicchetti and Garmezy (1993a) support this sentiment and point out the importance of keeping this in mind when operationalising this construct.

The idea of resilience as a dynamic construct is echoed by Freitas and Downey (1998), who call for a conceptualisation of resilience which takes into account development, domain and context. In their social interactional consideration of resilience, DeGarmo and Forgatch (1999) emphasise the role of interactional contexts in promoting resilience. Context as an important component in conceptualisation of resilience is also proposed by Massey, Cameron, Ouellette and Fine (1998) in their consideration of resilience as a process. They suggest that social, cultural and political contexts exert a powerful influence on people's resilience as, as such, should not be ignored.

The important notions of learning, skills obtained from the environment, and the ability of individuals to make the best of their circumstances are present in these conceptualisations. Saleebey (1996) adds to this view in considering resilience to be an articulation of skills and knowledge. Thus, it is not only that individuals possess traits that enable them to overcome

adversity, but that they are encouraged in these attitudes or traits, are helped to develop skills, and find some kind of support from their environment, that determines whether or not they will succumb to the stressors they face.

Egeland and his colleagues (Egeland et al., 1993) label their conceptualisation of resilience the organisational perspective. Since this approach closely resembles the views propounded by other supporters of the process model, I have included it here, although it also shares an affinity with the developmental or life cycle perspective, which follows. In essence, this perspective adopts the definition of resilience as a transactional process within an organisational framework. This means that individuals' development is determined by a variety of intra- and interpersonal factors in the context of a certain environment, all of which influence the vulnerability or resilience of the child (Egeland et al., 1993).

The idea of a process implies two aspects not present in previous definitions: an emphasis on context, the environment, such as family, school and community; and the idea of interaction as contributing to the development or realisation of resilience. Proponents of the lifespan perspective take this idea further.

### The Life Cycle Perspective of Resilience

Closely related to the view of resilience as a process is its conceptualisation as a developmental operation. Rutter (in Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Higgitt & Target, 1994) does not conceive of resilience as an attribute born into children or even acquired (learned) during their development, thus differing from many of the definitions mentioned above. This author believes that it is a process which characterises a complex social system at a moment in time, and is cultivated through a number of advantageous personal attributes as well as family, social and cultural environments. As such, it cannot be ascribed to any one characteristic or set of characteristics. Resilience is thus a set of social and intrapsychic processes which develop over time: it is normal development under difficult conditions.

Egeland et al. (1993) agree that resilience is determined by the interaction of genetic, biological, psychological and sociological factors in the context of environmental support. According to them, it is not a childhood given, but a capacity that develops over time within

an interactional context. They further believe that the individual increasingly participates in this process by incorporating his or her experiences, attitudes, expectations and feelings derived from a history of interactions. Within this perspective, resilience is viewed as the ability to use internal and external resources successfully to resolve stage-salient developmental issues (Egeland et al., 1993). This approach thus sees resilience in terms of an interaction between 'nature and nurture', and moves away from the focus on individuals which has characterised the field of resilience research for many years. It is only very recently that more studies are paying attention to the role of culture and community as contextual factors in conceptualisations of resilience (see, for example, Cox & Brooks-Gunn, 1999; Fogelman, 1998; Hogman, 1998; Kalayjian & Shahinian, 1998; Parra & Guarnaccia, 1998). It has also meant a slight shift away from a focus on children towards a consideration of older people (eg, Bergeman & Wallace, 1999). In this process, many researchers have searched for sources of resilience outside of the family, such as school and community resources (Walsh, 1996). A conceptualisation of resilience as a systemic phenomenon, and one which could reside within the family (rather than within individual family members), is one which has been explored to a lesser extent in the literature.

### Resilience as a Systemic Construct

In her study of resilient families, Walsh (1996; 1998) found that a systemic approach was necessary in which resilience is not seen as merely the adaptation of the individual within a certain context, but is considered from the point of view of the relationships and processes existing in a system. She thus coins the phrase "relational resilience" (Walsh, 1996, p.267). Whereas the historical perspective on families has considered them as often dysfunctional and therefore deem them to constitute risk factors, Walsh adopts the notion of a challenged family who moves together on a developmental trajectory in the life cycle of the family (Walsh, 1996). This view resonates with the life cycle perspective in that the dimension of time is incorporated with interactional processes. Walsh (1996;1998) also emphasises the importance of family processes over family form in shaping family functioning and highlights the role of key interactional processes which enable families to transcend crises. She furthermore points to the significance of family beliefs and spirituality as keys to family resilience (Walsh, 1998). Cox and Brooks-Gunn (1999) agree that family processes and relations within the family and



between the family and larger contexts are critical in a conceptualisation of resilience. This shift in focus allows different processes to be explored, thus opening the field to new information.

Some authors draw on systemic concepts in their description of resilience, while retaining a focus on the individual in the system. For example, Flach (1988) uses systemic terms of homeostasis and the interplay between stability and change in his description of resilience as a process of reintegration following chaos and emotional disruption; however, he describes the individual in this process, rather than the system in which this chaos and reintegration occurs. Similarly, while Emery (1999) integrates various contexts (socioeconomic, legal, etc) in his systems model of children's resilience to their parents' divorce, the focus remains on the children and not on the family as a system.

The conceptualisation of resilience as a systemic construct acknowledges the embeddedness of the individual in his or her community, but differs from the life cycle and process views in that the development of the individual is not the primary focus; rather, the spotlight falls on the ecology in which resilience is fostered and the network of relationships within which resilience resides. An important contribution in this respect was made by Cross (1998), who acknowledges the existence of two world views — linear and relational — and discusses family resilience according to the relational view. This constitutes a significant shift in the predominantly linear focus on resilience, and is one which will be explored in some detail in this dissertation.

The 'network of relationships' is emphasised by Butler (1997), who believes that bouncing back from adversity is not an individualistic matter or a case of merely having the right biological makeup, but that it is a systemic phenomenon that is created within inter- and intrapersonal relationships. She expresses this notion very succinctly in her assertion that

what we call resilience is turning out to be an interactive and systemic phenomenon, the product of a complex relationship of inner strengths and outer help throughout a person's life span. Resilience is not only an individual matter.

It is the outward sign of a web of relationships and experiences that teach people mastery, doggedness, love, moral courage and hope (Butler, 1997, p.25).

\* \* \*

*Researcher:* From the above definitions it would appear that resilience does indeed evoke a myriad images and ideas. Although all of these conceptions recognise the inherent regenerative ability of people, beyond this broad definition, differences abound, with resilience being seen as a trait, a process, or even an expression of skills and knowledge. Is this diversity problematic?

*Family therapist:* One the one hand, this diversity and complexity contributes richness to our understanding of resilience. However, definitions which differ too much can create confusion and uncertainty, leading to a lack of conceptual coherence. One problem with all these different definitions is the diverging outcomes they propose. For instance, knowledge and skills can be instilled in people, while a trait is inherent to people, and processes occur between people. The differences referred to suggest different assumptions about people regarding the question of whether their lives are governed either by intrapsychic or interpersonal processes. Whether one considers resilient people to draw their courage from within, from existing social relationships, or from the meanings that they attach to certain events, or even a combination of these, certainly holds very different implications for how we will study them.

*Researcher:* So the problem arises when it comes to actually studying resilience in the empirical domain. It is often difficult to convert vague, complex conceptualisations into practically applicable operational definitions

when embarking upon research. A construct needs to be conceptualised in a way that is coherent with its implementation in research studies. Thus the type of study will determine the definition, and vice versa. The way researchers choose to select their units of analysis will not only influence the direction of their thinking, but also the actions they employ to solve their research problem (Efran, Lukens & Lukens, 1988). In essence, research cannot be conducted without symbolisation through language - it is a complex action that takes place in language.

*Family therapist:*

It is notable that several of the conceptualisations and definitions explored in this section include facets that are not so easily subject to methods of analysis that measure up to rigorous research standards. For example, Flach's (1988) definition of resilience as being the ability to experience fully the painful disorganisation and emotional tumult created by crisis, and as something that allows people to achieve a higher level of personal integration, would be rather tricky to prove empirically. And what about the notion of resilience as "an outward sign of a web of relationships" (Butler, 1997, p.25)? Let us see, therefore, how these views of resilience, together with the notions of risk and protective factors, have been conceived of in research studies, and what kinds of investigations have been made.

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### **Methodological Issues: "Doing it"**

Rigorous research is fundamental to knowledge claims in scientific circles, and form the core of our understanding of phenomena. This information subsequently informs us in our work with people, not least in psychology. So what kind of knowledge have we discovered, and what has constituted our means of knowledge acquisition thus far? In the following sections, studies reflecting some of the above conceptualisations are mentioned and synthesised

on the basis of the scope and subject of study. They are discussed under the headings of longitudinal studies, risk and protective factor studies, studies on children, on adults, on communities and on families. Qualitative studies are considered in a separate section.

### Longitudinal Studies

Longitudinal studies are commonly held to be a valuable source of information relating to resilience. Longitudinal studies by, for example, Deater-Deckhard and Dunn (1999), Egeland et al. (1993), Garmezy, Masten and Tellegen (1984), Hauser (1999), Masten et al. (1999); Radke-Yarrow and Sherman (1990), Radke-Yarrow and Brown (1993) and Reynolds (1998) take the approach that resilience means overcoming risk and therefore focus on protective and risk factors; however, Egeland and his colleagues' (1993) and Deater-Deckhard and Dunn's (1999) studies adopt the view that resilience is a process that occurs in the context of person-environment interactions and, as such, also take genetic, biological, psychological and sociological factors into account. Findings from a number of these studies (Deater-Deckhard & Dunn, 1999; Egeland et al., 1993; Radke-Yarrow & Sherman, 1990) indicate the importance of early emotional nurturance and suggest that resilient children draw whatever support they can from their environment. It is apparent that the role of the resilient personality itself in adapting to its circumstances is emphasised, with the implication that any strengths from the environment are only useful if the resilient child makes an effort to reach out for these.

Hauser's (1999) study stands out as a longitudinal study in which the personal narratives of subjects are used to identify themes of resilience involving young adults' constructions of themselves and relationships with others. Hauser's method included the identification of resilient adolescents/young adults using the criterion of significant crises during early and middle adolescence (ie, risk), and the extensive use of interviews to identify themes in the narratives. It is interesting that this represents a very recent development in research, that of attending to subjects' own experience of their lives and their own perception of their resilience.

Werner's (Werner, 1993; Werner & Smith, 1977, 1989) study of a cohort of Kauai islanders (in Hawaii) is considered to be one of the most significant studies of resilience to

date. In an extensive longitudinal study spanning thirty years, she and her colleagues used not only questionnaires but also community records, semi-structured interviews and other sources of information to track the progress of her subjects as they grew up. She took resilience to mean adult adaptation of individuals coming from high-risk backgrounds. The risk factors she identified included the following: poverty, perinatal stress, family discord, divorce, parental alcoholism and parental mental illness. Protective factors generally focussed on the subjects' personalities and interpersonal skills as identified by people in the community (teachers, psychologists, paediatricians, etc) and through the methods of inquiry mentioned above.

Werner's findings also seem to emphasise individual dispositions in describing respondents' resilience, yet she and her colleagues do make reference to relational aspects such as the existence of supportive relationships (especially with an adult non-family member) which seem to promote resilience, as well as an active searching for environments which they experienced as more compatible than the milieu of their parental home (Werner, 1993). Furthermore, Werner notes that several risk factors seem more predictive of later problems than a single risk factor (which people seem more able to deal with), a finding which Werner supports with reference to other studies. However, Rak and Patterson (1996) point out that even with multiple risk factors, most of the Kauai youths grew into effective thirty-something adults, a comment that complicates simple cause-effect arguments in explaining the relationship between risk and resilience. Risk factor studies are popular, probably because the definition of resilience as the absence of pathology in the face of "risk" is easily operationalised. As such, this approach deserves further comment.

### Risk and Protective Factor Studies

Kaplan et al. (1996) propose risk and protective factors as two essential components in their conceptualisation of resilience. The presence of biological, psychological and environmental *risk* factors (such as stressful life events and "toxic" conditions) increase an individual's vulnerability, while the presence of *protective* factors (personal, familial and industrial safety nets) help people to deal with personal and environmental problems. These protective factors are deemed to constitute an individual's capacity for resilience at any stage in their lifespan. Garmezy (in Smith & Carlson, 1997) defines risk factors as those

circumstances that increase people's likelihood of developing emotional or behavioural disorders, which Miller (1996) believes can impede the expression of resilience.

Werner's (1995) definition of resilience echoes these notions of risk and protection in that she sees the concept of resilience as describing three kinds of phenomena: good developmental outcomes despite high risk status, sustained competence under stress, and recovery from trauma. Under each of these conditions, the focus is on protective factors or mechanisms that moderate a person's reaction to a stressful situation, taking into account the presence of risk factors that heighten a person's chances of not being able to cope.

Studies which focus on risk factors typically look at the presence of elements in the environment (such as dysfunctional families with an alcoholic parent, for example; poverty, violence, substance abuse, illness, etc) which imply a potential for a negative outcome (Rak & Patterson, 1996). Such elements may include characteristics of individuals, families, social contexts, or the interaction between these (Smith & Carlson, 1997). Recent examples of such studies include Cummins, Ireland, Resnick and Blum (1998), Deater-Deckard and Dunn (1999), Hetherington (1999) and Vance, Fernandez and Biber (1998). The absence of pathology (or negative outcomes) in high-risk individuals is then deemed to be possibly due to the resilience of the individual, the nature of the risk factor or stressor, and the presence of protective factors which foster its development. The relationship between resilience and protective factors is explained by Dyer and McGuinness (1996), who define protective factors as specific competencies (namely, the healthy skills and abilities that people possess) which are necessary for resilience to occur.

Numerous protective factors have been associated with positive outcomes in so-called 'high-risk' children. Fonagy et al. (1994) provide an excellent overview of these, categorising factors that promote resilience according to the attributes of the resilient child himself or herself (eg, gender, temperament, absence of organic defects, and so on), features of the child's environment (eg, social and familial support, involvement with a network of community, religious and social relationships, and so on), and characteristic's of the child's psychological functioning (eg, high IQ, internal locus of control, sense of humour, higher sense of self-worth, etc). A further significant protective factor seems to be the presence of a strong

model, mentor or older person upon whom the resilient youth depends as a (chiefly emotional) resource (Vance et al., 1998; Werner, 1993). Kaplan et al. (1996) also provide an overview of protective factors, citing 20 factors associated with individual attributes, and the family, school and community. Some of these are echoed by Rak and Patterson (1996), who mention the importance of children's ability to gain others' positive attention, an active problem-solving approach, optimism, the vision of a meaningful life, independence, resilience to physical illness and so on. Vance et al. (1998) report similar findings, citing good problem-solving skills, likability, sense of humour, getting on well with others and having an adult mentor as predictors of good outcomes. This study also showed that, in their population of male youths showing a pattern of aggression and emotional disturbance, living at home with the natural parents may have a negative effect on school progress. Since the role of parents seems to be an important one in determining children's resilience (Deater-Deckard & Dunn, 1999), this is an important finding, implying that living with one's natural parents is not automatically a good thing, but depends on the context and situation of the family.

It is notable that a discussion on protective factors centres on elements found in the personalities and environments of children. It has already been mentioned that the discovery of traits associated with resilient people, while informative, is unsatisfactory in explaining the origin and operation of resilience; in addition, the emphasis on children precludes an understanding of resilient processes in other systems, such as adults, families, communities, cultures and subcultures, and so on. The study of risk and protective factors is further problematic in that it attempts to reduce resilience to a predictable interplay of variables present in the individual and his or her environment. Richters and Martinez (1993, p.624) warn that "there are few if any known factors that can be characterized as inevitable determinants of negative child outcomes". The question arises of whether risk and protective factor studies warrant their popularity, since the mere presence of a risk factor does not inevitably lead to bad outcomes. Conversely, the presence of protective factors does not guarantee a positive outcome. Richters and Martinez (1993) support this by stating that although family factors play a very important role, "much remains to be learned about the extent to which and how positive family factors protect children from, and/ or negative family factors become an essential pathway in causing adaptive failure" (p.624).

The range and degree of “risk factors” necessary for the evocation of resilience vary greatly across studies (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993a). These authors therefore warn investigators to be “cautious that children who are labelled resilient are not simply children who have not been exposed to the stressor under investigation” (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993a, p.500). Furthermore, the question arises of whether the mere presence of a stressor implies “risk”. And what then is “high-risk” and “low-risk”? The fact that studies report that people were exposed to a certain risk factor tells us nothing of the subjects’ experience of the magnitude of the risk factor. Hayes (1992) is another voice which is vocal in its criticism of the emphasis placed on risk studies, given the vagueness, ambiguity and imprecision of terms used in the language of risk. Consequently, we should heed Cicchetti and Garmezy’s (1993a) advice that all studies should entail comprehensive information about “risk factors”. These authors go on to suggest that people who have been labelled “resilient” may perhaps simply be “low-risk” individuals who have been subject to incorrect hypotheses regarding the nature of the risk factor. To complicate matters, Kaplan et al. (1996, p.159) state that

dozens of studies have been done on positive personal characteristics and environmental protective factors associated with individual resilience...[yet]...no work has been done to indicate which factors are more important than others or how many are necessary for optimal functioning.

All in all, it would appear that risk and protective factor studies, while contributing valuable information to the field, are not without flaws which may obscure our understanding of resilience. For this reason, Allen (1998) advocates a humble approach to such studies. Furthermore, there would appear to be a lack of clarity in the idea that while protective factors are deemed to arise in the environment as well as in the personality of the individual, it is the personality traits which form the focus of researchers’ interest more than, for example, the ecological field in which the resilient person, or family, or community finds itself.

### Studies on Children

A significant portion of the data pertaining to children’s resilience has already been discussed in the previous section. Apart from risk and protective factor studies, a number of additional studies on children exist. One such study was undertaken by Egeland et al. (1993),



who measured adaptation in childhood using a checklist. Resilience here was defined as having no diagnosis of serious problems in any of the areas assessed and not being on the borderline of reaching criteria for diagnoses. Six areas of functioning were assessed in this study: self-regulation; relationships within and outside the family; masteries (including interests, achievements, and goals); cognitive functioning; self-perception and other perceptions; and physical growth and health. This study reflects an approach in line with these authors' view of resilience as a process that develops over time. Personality is not the only aspect measured, but attention is given to relationships and the respondents' own perceptions of self and environment. The implication is that a certain interplay is needed between the individual and society in order for a person to exhibit resilience. This belief is borne out in many recent studies (eg, Carbonell, Reinherz & Giaconia, 1998; Catterall, 1998; Vance et al., 1998).

In their study of children's adaptation in the context of violent communities, Richters and Martinez (1993) agree with this view in their assertion that positive outcomes in the face of multiple adversities tend to be related to positive characteristics of families, communities, and the children themselves. Barber's (1999) study of Palestinian youths echoes such findings.

The developmental model was applied by Luthar, Doernberger and Zigler (1993), who discussed the definition of resilience in terms of children's success in meeting developmental tasks or societal expectations as reflected in overt, behavioural indices such as school grades and ratings by teachers, peers, and parents. The assumption underlying such an operational definition is that manifest competence usually reflects good underlying coping skills. However, Luthar and Zigler (1991) have shown that among high-risk children, those who are behaviourally competent are not necessarily well adjusted on indices of emotional adjustment. This study thus points out a further criticism of risk studies which assume that a lack of resilience typically manifests in behavioural problems.

Other studies emphasise the interplay between child and community, revealing, for example, the importance of certain family milieu and parent-child relationships and the influence of parental factors such as warmth and caring, sound discipline, responsivity to the children's needs and a healthy self-view of parents' efficacy on children's resilience (Barber,

1999; Cowan, Wyman, Work & Iker, 1995; Emery, 1999; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990). Most of these studies, while acknowledging the interactive nature of the child's development of resilience, still focus on the child as an individual, and consider interventions which were levelled at the child alone. Emery (1999) goes slightly further in using a family systems model to assess the resilience of children of divorced and divorcing parents, and includes a comprehensive discussion of children's experience of divorce within a historical and cultural context. He also considered the larger context played by the legal system in divorce.

### Studies on Communities

Besides children, resilience studies have focussed on adults, families and communities. Some work has been done by Elsass (1992) in the field of anthropology where he explored cultural resilience in ethnic minorities in the United States. Several studies (eg, Garbarino, 1992; Garmezy, 1991) have given attention to the social context in which (still individual) resilience resides. Findings here emphasise the initiative taken by people in shaping their own lives, and either rejecting the past to live exclusively in the present (eg, Holocaust victims) or embracing the past and one's history as a means of conserving one's identity (eg, Native American Indians). Elsass's (1992) book, however, deals with resilience as a *community* rather than as an *individual* concept, examining how communities survive. The result is a wealth of information which complements the literature in psychology which focusses predominantly on the individual. Much of its value lies in its narrative style and the emphasis on local and intuitive truths rather than quantitative measures — an approach somewhat overlooked in the literature.

Saleebey (1996) applauds a focus on cultural narratives, claiming that such accounts provide inspiration and meaning. Other community-focussed resilience studies include, for example, the work of Fogelman (1998) and Rosenman and Handelsman (1992), who, in their interventions with first or second generation Holocaust survivors, emphasise the role of community spirit and a shared history and experience as a means to resilience. Brookins and Robinson (1995) echo this stress on a sense of belonging in their research on the value of rites of passage as a way of empowering and promoting the resilience of both communities and individuals. Rutter (1987) and Sonn and Fisher (1998) document the importance of social

networks for support. Interestingly, social networks may also be a source of distress: Brodsky (1996) argues that a negative sense of community can be adaptive and lead to positive outcomes for individuals who perceive their community to be a burden rather than a resource. The implication of this finding is that researchers should not assume that the existence of a strong community network constitutes a source of resilience. Rather, the **meaning** of the community network for the research subject should be considered before such conclusions are drawn.

Other findings regarding the importance of ethnicity and cultural beliefs and traditions were reported by Parra and Guarnaccia (1998) in their study of caregivers of mentally ill people. Religion and spirituality, generally ignored in the resilience literature until fairly recently, are increasingly being cited as sources of resilience in many instances (eg, Angell, Dennis & Dumain, 1998; Brodsky, 1999; Haight, 1998; Holtz, 1998; Kalayjian & Shahinian, 1998).

More recent studies on communities seem to be paying more attention to the narratives of the research subjects themselves in defining their resilience (eg, Allen, Whittlesey, Pfefferbaum & Ondersma, 1999; Angell et al., 1998) as well as the importance of connectedness to others and the impact of culture (eg, Berk, 1998; Hogman, 1998; Karakashian, 1998). In this respect, Rousseau, Said, Gagne and Bibeau (1998) report how the resilience of Somali refugee children is enhanced by the acceptance of cultural meanings surrounding separation from their parents and the adoption of a social network (especially of peers), while Karakashian (1998) emphasises the role of cultural factors (such as the arts, literature, sports, institutions, and so on) in contributing to the strength of communities in war-torn Armenia. McCubbin and Thompson's (1998) series on resilience in families in different cultures dedicates a large section to resilient factors specific to racial and ethnic immigrant families, providing much needed cross-cultural information on resilience.

Cross-cultural studies, too, are an area which promises to contribute richly to our understanding of resilience in diverse areas. Dugan and Coles (1989) report on the value of such studies which reveal valuable information about the adaptation and survival of people from American inner cities to South African migrant labour communities. The importance of

such study is exemplified by Elsass (1992, ix), who states that “the psychology of survival is best understood when it is examined in many different cultural contexts and in a broad variety of social situations”. Therefore, the studies which are emerging from ravaged communities such as Armenia (Kalayjian & Shahinian, 1998; Karakshian, 1998), Bosnia (Berk, 1998), Somalia (Rousseau et al., 1998) and South Africa (Le Roux & Smith, 1999) are invaluable in providing new insights into cultural resilience. This view is supported by Werner (1995) who believes that a cross-cultural perspective will provide more information about individual dispositions and sources of support that will apply across cultural boundaries and in different contexts.

Johnson (1994) supports such research in underlining the importance of the identification of environments that are conducive to resilience. It is therefore relevant that relatively few studies emphasise larger systems such as the family and community as much as they do individuals. Community studies naturally focus more on interaction and context and environment than individually-oriented studies do. One study (Wandersman & Nation, 1998) has even considered the importance of the physical environment on resilience, with findings that illustrate the impact of physical, structural and social characteristics of the environment on health and resilience.

The above discussion shows that explorations of resilience in communities allows for a deeper consideration of context, culture and meaning, an emphasis which is less prominent in studies on individuals. It is also notable that it is only very recently that more studies which draw on the experience, meanings and narratives that people give to their own lives are being undertaken.

### Studies on Adults

The literature on adult populations is less prolific than that dealing with children; indeed, according to Watt, David, Ladd and Shamos (1995), studies dealing with resilient adults are “notably lacking”(p.209). Many of those that do exist (eg, Engdahl, Harkness, Eberly, Page & Bielinski, 1993; Fogelman, 1998; Himelin & McElrath, 1996; Hogman, 1998; Jenkins, 1997; Kalayjian & Shahinian, 1998; Valentine & Feinauer, 1993) focus on war veterans, refugees and

survivors of genocides and childhood trauma. Many of these, such as the one designed by Elder and Clipp (1989), more closely resemble studies done on children in both their conceptualisation and investigation of resilience. These authors measured ego resilience in combat veterans at adolescence (prewar) and age 40, using the absence of symptomatology as a gauge. Resilience was conceptualised as a personality trait which constitutes a degree of health, indicated by the following characteristics: warm, dependable, insightful, productive, socially perceptive, other directed, values independence, straightforward, comfortable with past decisions, values, intellectual matters, calm, sympathetic, wide interests. Other indices of ego resilience in the Elder and Clipp study included the following: goal oriented (high aspirations, productive, gets things done), satisfied with self, assertive, meets adversity, giving, sympathetic, arouses liking and acceptance, gregarious, and social poise. These findings echo the personality traits associated with resilience in children, although several additional dimensions reflect adult adaptation, such as feelings concerning past actions and decisions.

Other findings relating to survivors of childhood trauma accord with the findings of Werner (1995), Egeland et al. (1993) and others in the extraction of themes relating to the ability to find emotional support outside the family, self-regard, involvement with school or work activities outside the home, an active stance in directing the course of their lives, cognitive style and internal locus of control (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993). The Valentine and Feinauer study used a combination of questionnaires and interviews to obtain their data. Another study (Feinauer & Stuart, 1996), which used similar subjects (adult women survivors of childhood sexual abuse), measured the current lack of trauma symptoms in their subjects, thus subscribing to the view that resilience implies the lack of symptomatology in situations where this would be expected. Himelin and McElrath (1996) also focus on cognitive coping strategies, including self-perception, in the emergence of resilience in child sexual abuse survivors. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews constituted the method in this study. Kalayjian and Shahinian's (1998) qualitative study differed from those mentioned above in that it examined the resilience of survivors of the Ottoman Turkish genocide based on self-reported sources of strength. These included spiritual and religious convictions, the attribution of meaning to their survival and to later life accomplishments and social support. This study also did not rely on the existence of risk factors in childhood as a criterion.

Some of the articles which investigate adult resilience reveal slightly different factors than those relating to children: for example, Staudinger, Freund, Linden and Maas (1999) examine aspects of personality as they specifically relate to older persons, such as experience of time and personal life investment, which adds another dimension to the understanding of the resilience of the elderly. The role of memory processes and remembering through narrative in promoting resilience is explored by Jenkins (1997), while the importance of the interaction between environment and personality, rather than the predominance of any one of these two factors, is emphasised by Engdahl et al. (1993) and Bergeman and Wallace (1999) as a determinant of resilience. In addition, Valentine and Feinauer (1993) recommend listening carefully to people's stories about overcoming their difficulties, while Angell et al. (1998) report that storytelling promotes resilience and coping in bereaved adults, a finding supported by Wolin and Wolin (1998). These approaches represent a shift in that they reflect an awareness of the importance of personal narrative which has not been evident in the largely quantitative studies that have gone before.

It is interesting that results of studies investigating adults' adaptation to trauma in the childhood years resembles studies done on children themselves, while those focussing on adult trauma reveal slightly different information. This suggests that resilience in adults and children may not be identical, a notion which highlights the need for far greater emphasis on hitherto neglected studies of adult resilience. This view is supported by Jacelon (1997) who states that another area requiring further research is the process of resilience in different populations.

The above discussion of resilience in adults reflects the predominant conceptualisations of resilience as chiefly a personality trait, although a significant number of studies give attention to environmental processes and the individual's relationships. Furthermore, the popular method of evaluating resilience in terms of a lack of pathology is evident. More recently, studies on resilience in adults does seem to be moving towards a greater concern for the narratives and own experience of the research subjects.

#### Studies on Families

Other populations which have formed the focus of a few resilience studies are families. Mostly, these take the form of investigations into family resources and social support available

to the child, although in general, these are few (Walsh, 1996). McCubbin and McCubbin (1988, p.247) define family resilience as “characteristics, dimensions, and properties of families which help families to be resistant to disruption in the face of change and adaptive in the face of crisis situations”. In accordance with this definition, McCubbin and McCubbin use a developmental model to examine resilience in families, concentrating on the transition phases of adjustment and adaptation that all families encounter. They present a typology of balanced families, offering an interesting counterpoint to Walsh’s (1996) insistence on the uniqueness of families and the problematic conception of a healthy family. Walsh’s objections are not unfounded, however, in McCubbin and McCubbin’s (1988) findings that their typologies are of limited use when applied to families of different colour, culture or socioeconomic status. Nonetheless, this study presented some interesting findings, highlighting, like studies on communities have done (see the section on studies on communities), the importance of rituals characterised by traditions, routines and celebrations, a sense of family coherence and a fit between family and environment (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988). McCubbin and Thompson (1998) have recently published a series on resilience in families, in which they explore the role of ethnicity and culture in resilience. This series may go some way towards addressing the criticisms of Walsh (1996) concerning the application of resilience studies to different cultures.

Silliman (in Hawley & DeHaan, 1996, p.284) presents another definition which sees family resilience as being “the family’s capacity to cultivate strengths to positively meet the challenges of life”. Hawley and DeHaan propose a comprehensive definition which embraces the notions of context, developmental factors, the interactive combination of risk and protective factors and the family’s shared outlook both in the present and over time. This definition resonates both with systemic and developmental perspectives of resilience. A social interactional view of family resilience, proposed by DeGarmo and Forgatch (1999), emphasises the social environment of the parent (particularly the single mother) as a factor relating to family resilience and points out that certain contexts may protect or interfere with parenting practices. Risk and protective factors were used as indices in this approach.

Findings in studies on families reveal factors such as the importance of warmth, affection, emotional support, firm, reasonable boundaries, and so on, which may be provided either by parents or extended kin, as well as children’s ability to choose wisely a mentor, confidant or

spouse from their social network (Walsh, 1996). Further findings in Walsh's (1996; 1998) research include the value of cohesion, flexibility, open communication, problem solving, and affirming belief systems as well as the meaning that a family gives to a challenge: spiritual values, culture and ideas of purpose and dignity are relevant here. Related to these factors is the Hawley and DeHaan's (1996) concept of a family world view, which includes a family's existential beliefs, interpretation of reality and view of its environment, which has also been cited as a possible determinant of families' resilience.

Another significant point concerns the definition of a "healthy family" which Hoffman (1981) sees as being socially constructed; as such, the relevance of categories and scales relating to the identification or evaluation of such "healthy" families are understandably problematic (Walsh, 1996). It would thus appear that attempts to measure or quantify resilience in fields which are not easily reducible and quantifiable present dilemmas to rigorous research requirements. However, most research in the family field has been quantitative (Walsh, 1996). It is perhaps for this reason that Falicov (1995), also within the context of research on the family, advocates a view which recognises the flexibility of workable family models, and suggests an holistic approach to research.

Walsh (1996) also praises the usefulness of narrative accounts and the investigation of meanings that families attach to their crises. Walsh's research thus veers away from the search for a common picture or underlying "blueprint" which characterises all resilient families, and aims to understand key processes within each family that can strengthen that family's ability to cope with adversity (Walsh, 1996; 1998). Such an approach is supported by Cross (1998). He distinguished between linear and relational world views with reference to resilience in families, and advocates examining resilience in families in relational terms.

### Qualitative Studies

Attention thus far has been mainly given to issues surrounding quantitative studies. However, few truly qualitative reports seem to exist, especially in comparison to the mass of quantitative literature. Indeed, in 1993, an entire issue of *Development and Psychopathology* (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993b) was set aside for resilience studies - the vast majority of which were, perhaps predictably, largely quantitative.



Three good examples of the elegance and fullness of qualitative investigation are Franz and Stewart's (1994) book entitled *Women creating lives: Identities, resilience and resistance*, O'Connell Higgins' (1994) *Resilient Adults: Overcoming a cruel past* and the special issue on "Bouncing back" in the *Family Therapy Networker* (Simon, 1997). These sources pay tribute to a less quantifiable yet richly informative source of knowledge in which the stories of resilient people are given a forum. Narrative accounts describing how people have overcome their struggles (eg, Laux, 1997; Schwartz, 1997) and researchers' perceptions of others' resilience (eg, Butler, 1997) introduce a qualitative slant to the research on resilience hitherto conspicuous in its absence.

Different information regarding resilience is provided by studies which allow participants to describe their own resilience. For example, Watt et al. (1995) explored resilience from a phenomenological perspective, with interesting findings. The adults in the study, who had survived trauma in childhood, considered themselves to have adjusted extremely well later in life, and emphasised their assertiveness, decisiveness, determination, self-worth, drive for autonomy and persistence in the face of overwhelming odds. The researchers report that the stories of the resilient subjects, especially in comparison with control subjects (who had not experienced the same level of trauma in childhood), were characterised by dramatic accounts of their own fortitude and lavish descriptions of the intensity of their childhood suffering. The authors suggest that this eagerness to share their success story may provide a means of validation for themselves as people while satisfying the need to challenge the myth that trauma authors pathology. A further important finding was respondents' reports that they dealt with trauma by creating an emotional distance from the agents of their oppression and sought support outside of the family. Many reported residual wounds that persist still, upholding the view that resilient people are not unscathed by their experiences. Many of these findings were confirmed in other qualitative studies on adults, such as that of Kalayjian and Shahinian (1998).

O'Connell Higgins' (1994) study, which also investigated the life experience of resilient adults, relates the remarkable narratives that people have to tell about their own lives, and emphasises how the scars of trauma are used to pole vault the victims to higher levels of insight, understanding, determination and, eventually, success. She extensively interviewed 40 adults whom she had identified as resilient according to a number of criteria, including the

notions of living, loving and working well. Her results not only confirm many of the findings from the quantitative pool of research, but add to our knowledge by including many transcripts from her participants, which illustrate and clarify the processes and history of their resilience. In addition, a chapter entitled "Recommendations from the resilient" (O'Connell Higgins, 1994, p.317) suggest human and, equally important, applicable ways of promoting resilience. The charm and value of O'Connell Higgins' book lies in its earthy deconstruction of what has almost come to be a mystifying concept in the literature. By investigating what people actually do to grow through horrifying experiences, we are rewarded not with dry lists of traits or factors which are associated with resilient people, but with an intuitive and descriptive understanding which combines aesthetics and pragmatics. There are disadvantages associated with such studies, however. In the context of this dissertation, for example, it is very difficult for me to convey a sense of what knowledge has been gained in the perusal of such texts; to reduce its complexity and fullness in impossible in this small space.

Other sources on qualitative information on resilience may be found, although these are often originate outside of the ambit of the academic literature on resilience as such. Rather, personal accounts of people's survival over triumph, found in the popular literature, may provide insight into this subject. So too, may accounts such as Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1987), which recounts his experiences as a prisoner in the Nazi death camps during the Second World War, and which provides an insightful exposition of his resilience as a function of the meaning he finds in the experience of suffering. Such sources could perhaps also address the relationship between the spiritual, religious and artistic aspects of resilience, which only very recently are being considered in resilience research (eg, Angell et al., 1998; Brodsky, 1999; Hauser, 1999; Kalayjian & Shahinian, 1998) but which are undoubtedly significant in understanding this concept.

Given some of the difficulties associated with resilience research mentioned in previous sections, qualitative research, coming as it does from a different angle, provides an interesting alternative to quantitative information. Massey et al. (1998) believe that qualitative approaches "have enabled researchers to grapple with conceptual, methodological, and ethical dilemmas related to the study of resilience and thriving" (p.337). Significantly, they also focus

(arguably for the first time) on the values that researchers attach to resilience and how these determine whom they consider to be resilient or not. This idea is explored in more detail in later chapters.

### Problems in Resilience Research

It is extremely difficult to create indices for the measurement of constructs such as resilience. Issues surrounding definitions (both conceptual and operational), the intangibility of the concepts and the focus of study (eg, the individual's inner processes or their interaction with the environment) complicate the construction of reliable and accurate measures. The question then arises: why are such methods so popular while those that do not demand equal attention to quantification are few and far between? Is it a question of entrapment within the dominant culture of scientific rigour and quantification? Or is it merely because it is easier to undertake such studies? Or perhaps the need for studies of a different nature is not yet apparent.

The literature makes reference to a large number of scales or structured questionnaires (Baron et al., 1996; Carbonell et al., 1998; Elder & Clipp, 1989; Luthar et al., 1993; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988; Radke-Yarrow & Brown, 1993; Richters & Martinez, 1993; Wagnild & Young, 1993) which act as indices for the measurement of resilience. Problems with such instruments abound. For instance, quantitative measures present difficulties such as items being limited to yes/no answers which do not involve a descriptive element; parallel to this, respondents are not given an opportunity to explain the contexts which induce them to respond favourably or unfavourably to items. Low (1996, p.589) illustrates this with the example question "Do you feel in control of the events in your life?". Individuals are not able to explain their answer by indicating which contexts are relevant to their response and this results in researchers making assumptions about the motivations for individuals' responses. Low further questions the usefulness of statistical analysis as a method of studying resilience, but to date, few other measurements have been comprehensively presented in the literature.

Kinard (1998) points out that (apart from conceptual dilemmas) no consensus exists regarding operational definitions of resilience. This author goes on to identify methodological

problems associated with resilience research, mentioning the following issues: distinguishing between resilience and factors which promote or reduce it; choosing sources of measures and deciding how many to use; deciding on scoring criteria; deciding when to measure resilience and examining the stability of resilience over time.

A dilemma that few researchers have even considered is raised by Low (1996), who suggests that the very concept of resilience may be judgmental in that individuals (or groups, it may be assumed) who do not 'bounce back' in the face of adversity are deficient in some way. Such a view subverts the very essence of resilience as it not only blames the victim but places stress on them for their lack of 'competence'. The little considered less benevolent effects of such an approach to people include the notion that the promotion of psychological well-being might increase a sense of inadequacy for many, as it denies the reality of suffering and may add to the burden of guilt or resentment of those who feel that they should not be unhappy (Brady, 1990). Promoting resilience assumes an intrinsic lack thereof and, ironically, denies the very existence of resilience in people. In addition, Brady (1990, p.278) indicates that "the investment in the well-being of one group is often made at the expense of another". Although the concept of resilience itself is a response to a need for more information about a "healthy" position on the continuum of supernormality - normality - abnormality (Johnson, 1994), and as such constitutes a valuable step away from the alarming assumption of a "normal-abnormal" duality, it is neither an excuse for a neglect of "resilient" people 'who would manage anyway' nor for the assumption that if people struggle, they are weak and without resilience.

The dilemma here is therefore the incompatibility of assumptions which consider people to be simultaneously strong and capable of surviving, and weak and in need of help, guidance or skills. Although it can be said that no individual is ever invulnerable in all situations, neither are people completely helpless (Begun, 1993). It is the balance between these two states that research and practice has yet to address. The bottom line, says Jones (1991) in accordance with a salutogenic approach, is that resilience and adaptation should be seen as resources rather than outcomes.

The abovementioned problems are merely some of those associated with resilience research. Fonagy et al. (1994) point out that the large body of research on resilience, which revealing many predictors of and characteristics associated with resilience, fails to provide us with information which is practical and which can be organised into useful intervention strategies. Authors such as Fonagy et al. (1993) and Garmezy (1990) are among those who are concerned about the difficulties inherent in researching resilience and advocate, for example, more stringent research methods and the construction of theoretical models to organise empirical work.

\* \* \*

*Researcher:* I am wondering about the different approaches we have encountered in this chapter. It seems that even though researchers may conceptualise of resilience as something quite qualitative, imbued with personal meanings and attributions, they have difficulty in carrying such definitions through to their actual research. The bulk of operational definitions exclude such vague notions and revert to measures looking at pathology, certain predetermined behaviours, skills, risk and protective factors, and so on.

*Family therapist:* This illustrates one of the major limitations in studies on resilience to date. Garmezy (1990) has called for more rigorous research and more stringent psychometric measures as a means of attaining better, more useful results. However, the abstract nature of the phenomenon of resilience leads to the suspicion that it will continue to elude confinement to quantitative boxes, and one wonders if investigations which give attention to description, narration and open-ended enquiry — as some researchers are starting to do — may not represent a more promising journey in the quest for an understanding of resilience. Such

an approach is advocated by Bateson (in Keeney 1983, p.94), who states:

We social scientists would do well to hold back our eagerness to control that world which we so imperfectly understand... Rather, our studies could be inspired by a more ancient, but today less honored, motive: a curiosity about the world of which we are a part. The rewards of such work are not power but beauty.

*Researcher:* You imply that going the route of more, better and more rigorous quantitative studies may provide less new information than we suppose. Proposing qualitative studies as an alternative, however, also presents difficulties, since a multitude of different qualitative approaches exists. Fetterman (1988, p.3) points out that qualitative investigations range from being “radically phenomenological” and “artistically oriented” to “mildly positivistic” and “scientifically based”.

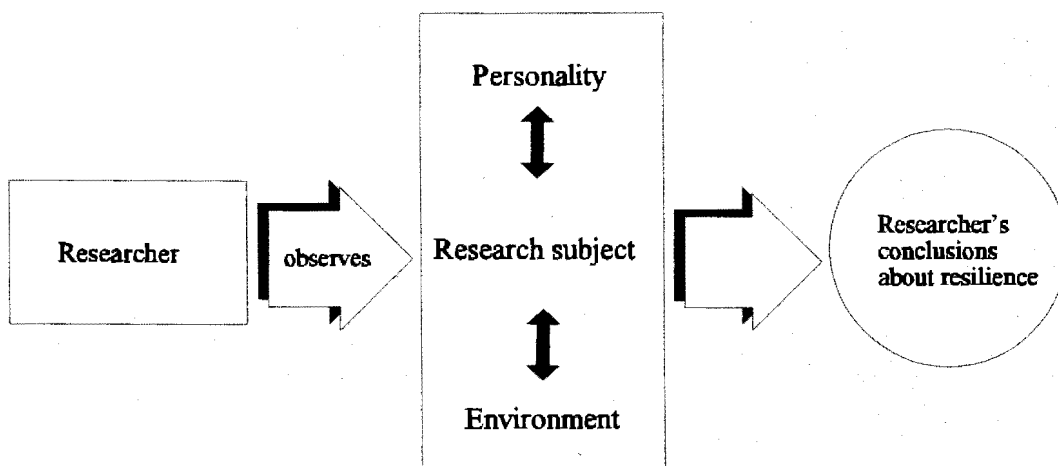
*Family therapist:* Perhaps it is not merely a shift from quantitative empiricism to qualitative empiricism which is needed, but rather a shift in paradigm. We have looked fairly briefly at the type of literature and some of the findings that exist on resilience. Referring to the paths and the journeys mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, many different paths have been represented here, reflecting the various assumptions which direct our process of knowledge acquisition. Let us consider, then, the paradigms underlying the studies discussed in this chapter.

\* \* \*

## Paradigms — The Roads Travelled

Looking at the research studies and various conceptualisations of resilience cited in Chapter 2, we may infer the following assumptions underlying the thinking of many researchers on resilience:

- 1) Resilience is a “thing” - for example, a personality trait, ability, characteristic, and so on (p.9), which, although it cannot be touched or seen, is manifested through certain behaviours on the part of the “possessor” of this thing.
- 2) Resilience may be studied and explained in terms of its nature, aetiology, effects, and so on, as frequently observed in empirical, quantitative research.
- 3) Resilience may be understood through an objective and orderly examination of appropriate subjects (the principles of stringent, empirical research).
- 4) Complexity and uncertainty are signs of an incomplete and inadequate study, whereas clarity and systematic explanation are considered useful aims.



**Figure 2.1.** A Newtonian view of resilience research

Not all of the researchers and studies discussed in Chapter 2 conform to all of these principles, however. The work of Butler (1997), Cross (1998) and Walsh (1996; 1998) (among others) stands out in this respect, and their emphasis on ecology and relationships may be considered to reflect these assumptions:

- 1) Resilience is a sign (or symptom) of certain patterns of interaction between people (systems).
- 2) A researcher may come to understand resilience by identifying these patterns of interaction.
- 3) The resilient system is composed of parts (eg, mentors, support networks, challenged individuals or families) which interact to make up the resilient whole.

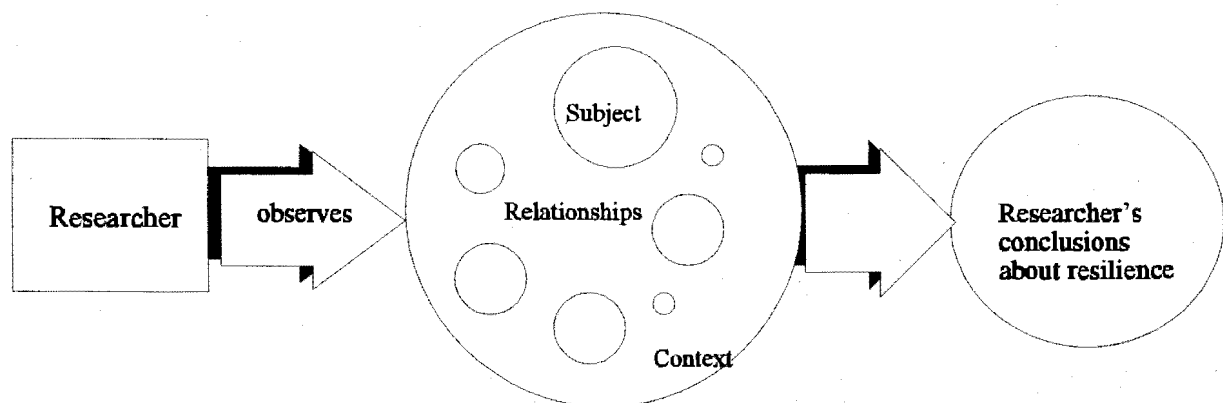
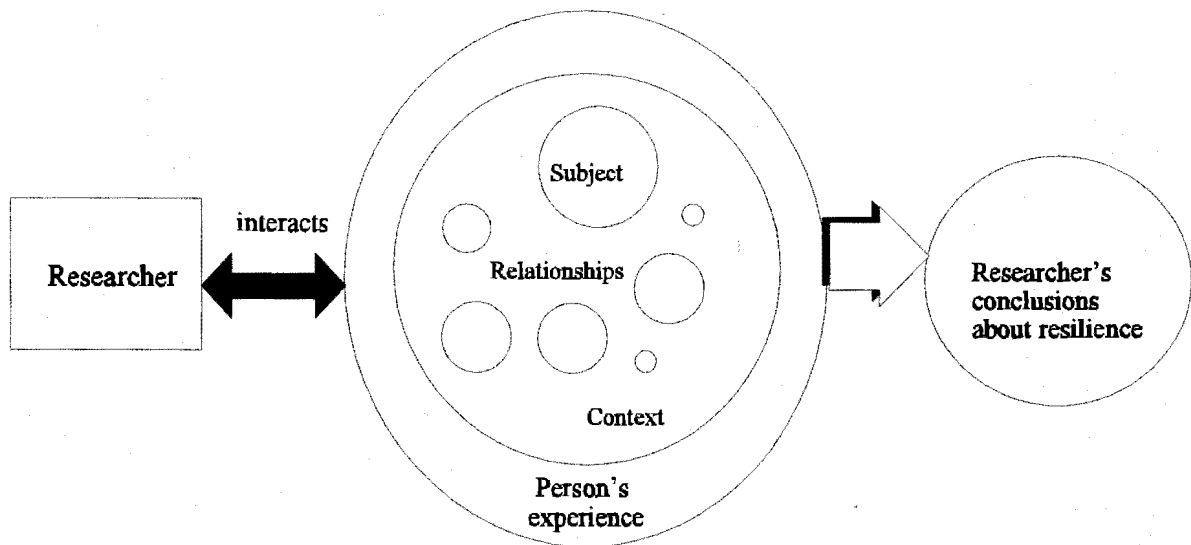


Figure 2.2. A systemic view of resilience research

In addition, the few studies that have taken a phenomenological or narrative stance (eg, Angell et al., 1998; Franz & Stewart, 1994; Hauser, 1999; Laux, 1997; O'Connell Higgins, 1994; Schwartz, 1997) suggest the following:



- 1) Resilience is the attribution of meaning given to the response of people to adverse situations.
- 2) It can only be understood through consultation and collaboration with those people.
- 3) It includes the unique history of the person and his or her sociocultural milieu.
- 4) Resilience cannot be ascribed to a single cause or positively associated with a particular combination of factors; rather, each case offers unique information and should be examined in its unique context.
- 5) Description and narrative is favoured over explanation.



**Figure 2.3.** A narrative (postmodern) view of resilience

The assumptions reflected above represent very different paradigms. Understandably, most of the studies examined in this chapter, and most of the research that exists in the field, adhere to the first group of assumptions listed. This first list can be said to represent a modernist, positivist, mechanistic or Newtonian tradition, in which the principles of empiricism, systematic analysis, linearity, absolute truth and objectivity direct research. The second list espouses a systemic paradigm, which emphasises understanding by contextualisation, pattern,

relativism, events as information, the principles of spacetime and heuristic truth. The third list shares a number of characteristics with the systemic paradigm, although it differs in that it emphasises to a greater extent the need for collaboration in knowledge acquisition (ie, the role of the observer), local, contextualised truths, an emphasis on meaning and narrative and a distaste for externally imposed form and meaning. It could be said to represent a postmodern paradigm.

This difference in outlook has not been commented upon in the literature (except perhaps briefly by Cross (1998), who refers to a linear versus a relational world view), and one wonders if it is not in fact this diverging of paths that has led us to such different conclusions concerning resilience. The literature is almost unanimous in its agreement that disparate and perhaps even incompatible definitions of resilience clutter the field; could this be a result of the different paradigmatic frameworks from which researchers work?

If this is indeed the case, then the diversity in the field should be celebrated as the product of our evolving ways of thinking and our quest for knowledge which leads us on ever expanding paths. However, given that the movement in many fields, such as science, literature, anthropology, has increasingly led away from a modernist emphasis on research, it is notable that material on resilience continues to represent this paradigm and that only very recent publications (and only a handful at that) begin to reflect a postmodern trend. By comparison, however, the literature exploring resilience from a postmodern perspective is remarkably limited.

### **Conclusion**

This discussion has attempted to look at descriptions of resilience and classify them into four broad categories, namely, resilience as trait, process, life cycle and systemic phenomenon. From this analysis, it can be observed that these conceptualisations agree in that resilience is more than merely the ability to weather hard times; rather, it refers to the ability to “bend” and “bounce back” from adversity and to learn from the experience to emerge scarred yet strengthened. However, the accord amongst conceptualisations does not extend much farther than this. Furthermore, since these predominantly intrapsychic definitions and the conceptual

frameworks that accompany them shape empirical work, the results of the mainly quantitative research that has been done are unsatisfactory from the point of view of other paradigms, such as the postmodern and systemic views of human interaction. Recent research, chiefly dealing with cultures and communities, and especially in response to ethnic cleansing (eg, Bosnia, Armenia), does attempt to address resilience in terms of meaning, spirituality, community, context and so on. This represents a belated and much needed shift in the focus of resilience research, and since it offers a different picture of resilience, deserves further investigation.

Methodological issues were discussed in terms of the various research done on resilience, and the general themes emerging from such research were briefly indicated. This discussion revealed a preference for approaching resilience studies from a quantitative perspective, with the result that although we have lists of traits associated with resilience and ideas about the kinds of environments conducive to resilience, insights into how resilience actually occurs and how resilient people see themselves and their worlds, richly explored in the qualitative literature, are overshadowed. The popularity of risk and protective factor research, and the problems inherent to this, were addressed. It was also suggested that the relative dearth of investigation into resilience in families, communities and cultures may contribute to the incompleteness of our understanding of this field.

Finally, it was proposed that a different approach may be needed in order to come to a fuller understanding of resilience. Although many interpretations of resilience have been proposed, most of these represent a mechanistic world view in which scientific rigour and empirical investigation, necessarily reductionistic, are advocated. Behind the kind of research that involves qualitative enquiry and an emphasis on ecology and meaning is an epistemology of ecologic, rather than mechanistic, thinking. In such a paradigm, resilience is conceptualised in a way that embraces complexity and aims to understand, rather than to explain, how it operates in and between people. A conception of this construct from the point of view of a different paradigmatic frame could provide valuable insights to the concept of resilience to the benefit not only of research but also of clinical work. An attempt to conceptualise resilience along these lines forms the focus of the following chapters.

## CHAPTER 3

### NEW WAYS OF KNOWING: THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT RESILIENCE

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

— Robert Frost  
“The road less travelled”

#### Introduction

Chapter 2 (p.36) pointed out the epistemological assumptions of much of the existing research on resilience, indicating that most of it is based on a Newtonian world view. Some research, such as Walsh (1996), Cross (1998) and Butler’s (1997) systemic views of resilience, as well as the qualitative studies mentioned, subscribe to a different epistemology, one that emphasises ecology, relationship and meaning. However, it is clear that the latter approaches are by far in the minority. The general feeling in the field seems to be that the lack of consensus surrounding the definition and understanding of resilience may be redressed by yet more research, and recommendations (Chapter 2, p.34) include calls for more stringent research methodologies — all of which constitute what Watzlawick calls “more of the same” (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974, p.31).

Approaching resilience from systemic and narrative angles, as an increasing number of researchers are starting to do (eg, Angell et al., 1998; Butler, 1997; Cross, 1998; O’Connell Higgins, 1994; Walsh, 1996), represents an attempt to break away from the “more of the same” attempted solution. However, it is notable that, apart from Cross (1998), these studies have not been explicitly presented in the literature as representing an alternative paradigm or world view. Furthermore, even the relatively few studies done from these angles do not touch upon the wealth of new information that might be offered should alternative approaches to resilience be explored in greater depth. This chapter aims to show that ecosystemic and

postmodern approaches, which are only beginning to be explored in the field of resilience research to date, constitute a significant change in the attempt to introduce “meaningful noise” (Keeney & Ross, 1992, p.44) to the study of human resilience. The basis for this change operates at the level of paradigm. It is proposed that solving the problem by applying more of the same is ineffective and a paradigm shift to another level may be more useful. As De Shazer (1991, p.xxi) puts it, “a change in where you stand changes everything”. I have chosen to explore the implications of changing perspectives in the form of a **dialogue** in which the ideas of a few prominent thinkers are explored.

*Researcher:* Several questions arise at this point. Firstly, De Shazer (1991) talks about a change in where you stand. Where are we shifting from, and shifting to? In other words, what is the paradigm shift we are talking about? And what do we hope to achieve by doing so? How will studies from a different perspective allow us to finally decide what resilience is?

*Family therapist:* Your first questions may be answered in a consideration of your last one. The aim of this study is not to finally pin down resilience, or to draw any definitive conclusions about what resilience is. In a study that seeks to complexify and expand ideas about resilience, this would be what Bateson (1979) calls an epistemological error. Part of the confusion surrounding resilience has arisen, I believe, because of this very goal. The assumption of one correct truth has led us on what some might call a wild goose chase to quantify something which is not quantifiable, to operationalise a construct that might be considered as not existing out there at all, but which might merely be a commonly agreed upon creation in our socially constructed world.

*Researcher:* You are way ahead of me here. In one paragraph you mention epistemology, a social constructed world, the rejection of absolute truth — all concepts worthy of a chapter each — and you suggest that

resilience, a construct which has stimulated an abundance of research, dialogue and debate, does not even exist!

*Family therapist:* These ideas are all connected to the alternative epistemology mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. This “new epistemology” is in fact anything but new, and this dissertation does not afford us the luxury of retracing its evolutionary steps and the various approaches in the field that have arisen from it. However, it is necessary to indicate very broadly what is meant by this term.

### **Beyond Newton**

The 1950s saw a number of thinkers in the family therapy field start to investigate a different way of understanding human behaviour — a way of thinking that rejected the ideas of objectivity as a standard for the revelation of the ‘real’ nature of things, the emphasis on reduction and causality, a mechanistic theory of human behaviour, the search for scientific proof in human phenomena, and an individual, intrapsychic approach to the study of people. Therapists were influenced by the works of, among others, Bateson (1972, 1979), Maturana and Varela (1980), Von Foerster (1981), and later by Auerswald (1985, 1987), Keeney and Ross (1992), Anderson and Goolishian (1986, 1988), Andersen (1987) and White and Epston (1990). They began to talk of nonlinear, ecosystemic and cybernetic epistemologies, and of narrative, constructivist, social constructionist, postmodern and noninterventionist approaches. While these terms are not synonymous, and while different approaches, theories and techniques are advocated in each, all of them reflect the key shift from a Newtonian world view to one which embraces the principles of relativity, holism, fit, context, and a consensually created reality in which description and storying are valued over explanation and proof.

The aim of this discussion is not to question the positivistic paradigm of thinking or the validity of quantitative research principals. The positivist-empirical science has an important place and role to play in the world of science which cannot be denied or lightly discarded. This argument is demonstrated by Becvar and Becvar (1996, p.337-338) in the following quote:

We do not challenge the usefulness of the methodology consistent with the positivist-empirical research tradition. We do, however, suggest that like world views, it is but *a* way of knowing, not *the* way of knowing. It is our invention, our attempt to transcend our subjectivity by defining a specific protocol to make our subjectivity objective. Further, it is consistent with the paradigm in which it emerged. We would therefore argue for the potential of other equally useful inventions to guide our search for knowledge. We would insist that whatever methodologies we create be logically consistent with the assumptions of the paradigm we are using.

However, in order to be “logically consistent with the assumptions of the paradigm we are using” (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p.338), we need to examine these assumptions in more detail.

*Researcher:* Many authors, representing different fields and approaches, are cited here. Whose approach should we follow in our investigation of resilience?

*Family therapist:* Studying resilience through any of the lenses offered by the various schools of thought would probably yield fascinating and valuable information about resilient people. Yet, in the spirit of an epistemology that embraces complexity and holism, it seems preferable at this point to choose not one particular approach, but rather to consider what a number of authors and thinkers, representative of various approaches within the “new” epistemology, might say about resilience and resilient people or systems.

*Researcher:* What shall we hope to find in a conversation with these thinkers? After all, none of them has ever explicitly talked about resilience.

*Family therapist:* No they haven't — but from their ideas about therapy, people and systems we may extrapolate how they might consider resilience. Taking into account their epistemologies, beliefs and assumptions about people and behaviour, we may explore ideas which we can apply to our own deconstruction of this enigmatic phenomenon.

### **Asking the Experts: Alternative Views on Resilience**

Most of the writers consulted in the following section have worked in the field of family therapy, which has been active in examining itself and in thinking about the way it thinks. Their approaches, which are primarily directed at therapy, may be considered relevant to research in that this study is concerned with how we conceptualise resilience and how our conceptualisations influence the way we go about studying it. The discussion is by no means exhaustive; rather, it should be considered illustrative of general trends in the field and of how we might go about implementing future studies on resilience. Here we search for the tools, provided by our predecessors, that will allow us to paint, chisel, sketch or mould our ideas around resilience to come up with a different picture — or rather, a different perspective on the same picture.

#### Edgar Auerswald

*Researcher:* So many great minds, so little time... Let's start with Auerswald, always a favourite of mine, whose ecological approach (Auerswald, 1968) advocates looking at the world in which people find themselves as a guide to understanding them. Surely he would disagree that resilience is, for example, an innate personality trait?

*Family therapist:* It is likely that Auerswald would consider such a definition to form part of a mechologic world view and an explicate rather than an implicate reality (Auerswald, 1985; 1990). An explicate reality is explained as being the rules, immanent to our thinking, which exist in order to organise and edit experience and thought (Auerswald 1990). It is in the



explicate realm that resilience can be considered an objectifiable construct to be understood as a “complex object made up of parts” (Auerswald, 1990, p.28). It seems from the literature that many current conceptualisations of resilience try to analyse the “parts” that constitute it; and that even theories that take into account its trajectory over a lifetime and environmental influences consider these in terms of variables, outside forces acting upon the person(s), and against the background of a linear continuum of resilience—non-resilience. Implicate reality, on the other hand, is the irrational realm of experience, creativity, fantasy, play, connection and relationship: it is “patterned connections in a domain of relations” (Auerswald, 1990, p.26). It denotes a reality that is not objectifiable and therefore not reducible to variables, traits, characteristics or factors.

*Researcher:* So, according to this view, how would we seek to understand resilience?

*Family therapist:* In an implicate reality, resilience would be defined in terms of patterns, sets of connected events, taking place within a relational domain. Auerswald (1990, p.29) emphasises that changes and transformations in these connections should be considered in their context of “timespace”, thus embracing the complexities of situatedness in a unique, multidimensional domain rather than the linear concept of life stage. Thus a conceptualisation of resilience would not be considered, for example, in terms of a constant ‘personality’ since this would exclude the interrelating dimensions inherent in the context (time and space). In fact, Auerswald would probably make no attempt to define “resilience” as a constant at all, but would consider it as a function of an eventshape in timespace — in other words, as part of the ecology of a person (organisation/family/community) within various time frames.

*Researcher:* So you would need to look not only at the particular behavioural sequences or patterns of a “resilient” person or family, but also at significant events through time and the contexts of those events — as expressed by the research “subject”. This seems a tall order for conventional research. How does Auerswald propose this be done?

*Family therapist:* The implications for scientific writing are significant, since a sense of the “irrational realm” is usually expressed as art, poetry and so on (Auerswald, 1990, p.25) and is not readily available to objective appraisal. Auerswald admits that there is no language for the description of an implicate reality, which is “most richly expressed in art” (Auerswald, 1990, p.30). Also, the language we use is confusing because words carry double meanings, having being adopted from other contexts. Given these limitations, however, it would seem that the next best thing is, through being an “ecological detective” (Auerswald, 1985, p.6), to construct a descriptive story in which experience, creativity, fantasy, play, connection and relationship are emphasised over an attempt to explain and predict a situation — Auerswald (1990) suggests that the latter approach often means that the relational aspects of the situation are lost. It is perhaps enough that a descriptive approach to research, representing as it does a different thought system, may produce a different edition of reality (Auerswald, 1990).

*Researcher:* This sounds very much like the postmodern emphasis on narrative, description and storying. Auerswald also suggests that patterns of events that influence people affect them “regardless of their seemingly remote occurrence in time” (Auerswald, 1990, p.37), which echoes the postmodern emphasis on sociohistorical context. Nevertheless, Auerswald’s ecosystemic approach also relies on interactional processes and information exchange (Auerswald, 1968) — it seems to me like a nice blend between the systemic and communication schools and the postmodernists.

*Family therapist:* Yes; indeed, Auerswald (1968) agrees that approaches or theories that examine such processes are useful as part of an ecosystemic study. I think a central tenet of Auerswald's ecosystemic approach is the emphasis on the *interfaces* between systems, and how these interfaces contribute to the creation of a particular phenomenon. This is reminiscent of Dell's (1982) concept of systemic fit or coherence and Maturana's structural coupling (Maturana & Varela, 1980).

### Humberto Maturana

*Researcher:* How are the ideas of these two authors, who represent a second order cybernetics view relevant to resilience?

*Family therapist:* Maturana's ideas about structural coupling suggests that the system and its medium are always *in congruence* at any given time and that they fit in some way (Kenny, 1989; Maturana & Varela, 1980). A rich description of resilience would, according to this principle, be incomplete without an exploration of that with which the (resilient) person "couples". It also implies, incidentally, that there is no such thing as a resilient person in isolation from the context — again, this accords with Auerswald's views.

*Researcher:* So Maturana might well see resilience as the result of the structural coupling of systems.

*Family therapist:* Ah — by talking of "result" you fall into the trap of assuming causality. No, I suspect that Maturana would rather consider resilience to be the *name* we give to our observation of a particular structural coupling of systems. Maturana is very clear in his ideas about both causality and the use of language. He decries attempts to search for cause or effect (result) since, outside of language, there are no such things as cause, purpose, intention and so on (Kenny 1989). The process of languaging

brings forth an object (which we call resilience) which obscures the operations of distinction which underlie this object (eg, what happens in the interface between systems that we then call resilience). The “object” of resilience is created through language and has no independent existence in itself: Maturana says that prior to language there are no objects (Kenny, 1989). It is here that researchers may be led astray, since they try to reify resilience and define it independently of those operations of distinction that create it. In this respect Maturana (in Kenny, 1989) refers to a distinction between the domain of experience and the domain of explanation, which resonates with the previously mentioned distinction between explanation and description (which, according to Dell (1986) is the level closest to pure experience, and which cannot be reported directly).

*Researcher:*

Okay, so Maturana emphasises language — much like the postmodern writers later did; and dislikes attributions of cause and effect. We guessed that he would see resilience in terms of the structural coupling of systems that evoke what we call resilient behaviours. So in looking at resilience from a different perspective, we would need to pay attention to how so-called “resilient” people *language* around the operations of distinction which give rise to “resilience”; and we would also need to look at those systems which couple or interface around our observation of “resilience”.

*Family therapist:*

Interesting how we are suddenly talking about “resilience” in quotation marks...

Maturana was not the only theorist to emphasise the importance of language — in fact, this has been a much discussed issue in the family therapy literature as a whole. We could perhaps depart for a moment from a pure consideration of Maturana’s ideas in order to discuss this important concept in a little more detail. Keeney and Morris (1985),

for example, discuss language in terms of the distinctions that we draw through it. Becvar and Becvar (1996) remind us that it is through language that human beings know; and it is through this knowing that we are able to construct our world. All human actions take place in language — they are language dependent. People punctuate their world by arbitrarily drawing distinctions (Keeney, 1983), often through their use of language. We distinguish different units (units for research, eg, families) by drawing boundaries as we choose to do. These units can be seen as “definitions in language, and they invariably have an arbitrary quality — they can be created, selected, rearranged and dissolved” (Efran et al., 1988, p.30).

*Researcher:* I can imagine that the implications of this for research are quite broad.

*Family therapist:* Some writers have explored some of these implications. For example, Madigan, Johnson and Linton (1995) explore the idea that language can be used to entrench a certain epistemology: as students learn to write and describe in a certain style, using certain vocabulary, so they learn to think in that style and to adopt the values that it espouses. Students thus implicitly adopt that particular approach to knowledge construction. One implication for research is that ‘APA style’ (Madigan et al., 1995) dictates the language to be used in writing reports and journal articles. The implications of this are further compounded by the fact that psychology as an empirical discipline considers such a style of writing to use language as a simple transmitter of information, rather than a product of thinking in itself (Madigan et al., 1995).

*Researcher:* As such, an awareness of language as a socialisation agent and as an epistemological tool remains hidden.

*Family therapist:* Indeed. Keeney and Morris (1985, p.549) point out that “graduate programs, postgraduate training programs, and editorial boards legislate

what theories and methodologies are to be mastered and, more importantly, which ones are to be ignored". In a tradition of empiricism and rigorous, "scientific" research, it is clear that many fields of inquiry have consequently been closed to investigation.

*Researcher:* But surely the advent of a "new epistemology", in which qualitative research is gaining respectability and where the role of language is examined, allows for research into previously unexplored areas of human experience?

*Family therapist:* It should; however, this new epistemology demands the construction of a different way of thinking about things, and thus a new language of description. It was Auerswald (1990) who noted that there is no language for the description of implicate reality.

*Researcher:* It seems imperative, in light of the above, that the role of language in research should not be ignored. Many authors, including Maturana and Auerswald, make this quite clear.

*Family therapist:* Other thinkers who emphasise language are Anderson and Goolishian, whose ideas we will discuss later on. Incidentally, Maturana shares another belief with Auerswald and the postmodern thinkers besides the importance of language, namely, an emphasis on history. Maturana says that any situation or phenomenon is "reached by the *sum total history* of the person's co-ontogenic structural drift" (Kenny, 1989, p.44, my emphasis), implying that all that has gone before is relevant to what is observed in the present.

*Researcher:* Another similarity shared by the authors mentioned above is the importance of looking at the role of the observer.

*Family therapist:* Yes; therefore, in looking at resilience from a different perspective, we also need to look at ourselves as observers (researchers, therapists, readers). Maturana's emphasis on the ontology of the observer and the constructivist notion of the nonexistence of an objective reality means that we must deconstruct the previously unquestioned reality of who is looking, and not only who is being looked at.

*Researcher:* What about Paul Dell, whose concept of coherence we mentioned earlier?

### Paul Dell

*Family therapist:* Dell's ideas about coherence are similar to Maturana's structural coupling. Based on Bateson's concept of Learning II, Dell (1982) might consider resilience to be "a pattern of behaviours and premises that has a perfect, complementary fit to the individual's environment — *as he has experienced (and made) it*" (p.34, original emphasis).

*Researcher:* But how does this view align with the definition of resilience as an *unusual* response to situations? After all, the term is used to describe how some people respond positively and proactively to situations in which others crumble.

*Family therapist:* Maturana might explain this difference in reaction using the concept of structure determinism, which means that the same stimulus will affect individuals in different ways, depending on that individual's internal structure (Maturana & Varela, 1980). Dell (1982) refers to primary and higher-order coherence to explain how individuals can change within rigid systems. He says that while the structural coherence of the reciprocal interactional system (structurally coupled systems) can be discontinuously transformed, the behavioural coherence of an individual cannot (ie, he or she is structurally determined to react in a particular

way, which cannot be determined by the external environment). Dell, again following Bateson, might describe resilience as the behaviours that arise through a unique “evolution of fitting together” (Dell, 1982, p.37) of members of a system. This is not a very satisfactory definition, since some “evolutions of fitting together” will not display the qualities we like to call resilience, and so we need to add to this description the injunction to consider the experience and primary coherence of the people in question in order to describe their resilience.

*Researcher:* So Dell and Maturana would see resilience as both a function of the fit between individual and environment and as a function of the nature of the individuals (their primary behavioural coherence or structure determinism) that compose the system?

*Family therapist:* I would say so. Notice how all of the ‘definitions’ of resilience offered up to this point are process-oriented and cannot in isolation adequately explain or describe resilience. Even at this point it is clear that a reductionist approach to resilience leaves us in the dark, and that an attempt at a fuller description is needed to provide clarity.

### Postmodernism

*Researcher:* Well, let’s look at the authors whose ideas and work embrace the philosophy of description. In the above discussion we have occasionally referred to postmodern and narrative ideas such as storying, rich description, and so on, although we haven’t really specified what we consider this to be or whose ideas we are citing.

*Family therapist:* Postmodernism is the youngest movement in the family therapy field and has met with both acclaim and criticism. Some of its critics warn against the possibility of overemphasising language and neglecting important issues such as inequality, damaging patterns of behaviour



(Doherty, 1991) as well as violating the reality principle (Speed, 1991). However, the tenet that most appeals to me in its application to a new exploration of resilience is its scepticism of ever establishing a science of human behaviour in which things can be discovered and explained, and the realisation that “human life cannot be understood through the recipe-bound dominion of modern science” (Hoffman, 1998, p.11). In this dissertation so far, resilience has revealed the sole attribute of being, in the objective sense, unknowable; and as such, we should not seek to explain (or know) it but should consider our study “a non-explanatory mode of understanding the activity of human life” (Hoffman, 1998, p.17).

*Researcher:* So how do postmodernists, or constructivists, go about this “non-explanatory mode of understanding”, and how can we apply that to the study of resilience?

*Family therapist:* Several ideas in the postmodern tradition may be useful in this respect. One of these is the notion that a problem system (or the system under analysis) is composed not of people, as is commonly thought, but of meanings (Hoffman, 1990). This implies that a system which may be described as resilient is done so on the basis of the network of meanings around it, rather than the people who compose it (such as the presence of a mentor, individual strength of character of the “resilient” person, an alcoholic father as a ‘risk factor’, or whatever).

*Researcher:* Therefore the ecology of meanings constructed around this system would be of interest to the researcher examining resilience. In other words, it is not individual persons that interest postmodernists, but the ideas that link them. But how do we discover these ideas? Wait, let me guess — through a conversation?

*Family therapist:* Exactly. Resilience, in the postmodern tradition, would be created in the conversational domain (Hoffman, 1990; Varela, 1979) as a product

of the participation of the individuals who shared in it (Hoffman, 1990). This of course includes the observer as participant. The observer, however, does not merely refer to the individual person; Varela (1979) prefers to talk about the observer community, since an observer never represents merely the single person but the culmination of his or her unique nervous system plus linguistic and cultural systems which act as filters through which information passes.

*Researcher:*

This is an interesting idea which implies, once again, that resilience is not something that exists 'out there' and which can be identified and explained. Rather, it is created in a conversation with others. This makes intuitive sense, because I doubt that most people, identified by others as resilient, necessarily think of themselves as resilient. Should they come to such a conclusion, I would imagine it happening as a result of some kind of conversation (whether this be an internal dialogue, or one that takes place between people).

Harlene Anderson and Harry Goolishian

*Family therapist:*

Two authors in the postmodern tradition who have had a lot to say about conversations are Anderson and Goolishian (in Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Anderson, Goolishian & Winderman, 1986). The universality of language as creator of objects and meanings in our world is stressed by these authors who assert that it is language that produces the patterns that theorists imagine exist independently of their descriptions (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Anderson et al., 1986). (This view resonates with Maturana's (in Kenny, 1989) ideas about objects, created through language, which obscure the operations of distinction for which they stand.) Consequently, the role of language in conversation should not be ignored.

Anderson and Goolishian (1988) believe that a useful way of looking at a phenomenon is to consider the linguistic system which is distinguished by those who are in language around it. The implication is that for resilience to exist, people must engage in some meaning-generating discourse or dialogue which is relevant to the creation of resilient behaviours.

*Researcher:* Huh? English, please.

*Family therapist:* In other words, resilience is a linguistic event — a meaning given to something by those languaging around it. Anderson and Goolishian (1988) say that “we live and take action in a world that we define through our descriptive language in social intercourse with others” (p.377). So to explore and understand resilience, we would need to construct meanings of resilience through dialogue.

*Researcher:* Which is pretty much what we are doing in this dissertation. Although, to be clear, we should define what is meant by dialogue.

*Family therapist:* This is important, since dialogue does not merely refer to that interaction which occurs in the therapy room or over a glass of good wine. As Efran and Clarfield (1992, p.202) graphically put it, “dialogue includes fist-fights, blood feuds, corporate take-overs, suicides, and political dictatorships”. So a conversation need not be verbal, nor does it occur as a single unit in a particular space and time.

*Researcher:* And all these behaviours have meaning, which, of course, is different for the various participants in the conversation. Resilience does not exist as something which can be studied and conceived of independently of any given observer community or participants in a conversation. I would guess then that Anderson and Goolishian would not subscribe to providing set definitions for something like resilience.

*Family therapist:* Right. They believe that systems are fluid and always changing; and since resilience is deemed to exist only in language (it is socially and intersubjectively constructed), it is open to constant renegotiation (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). It would be completely contrary to this belief to put forward a decontextualised, set-in-stone definition which is predetermined, preinterpreted and divorced from the meaning system of those involved! Resilience in research may be more useful as a “temporary lens rather than ... representations that conform to a social reality” (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p.373). In this way, we are able to look at the evolutionary, linguistic processes that produce the patterns that we describe as resilience. It is therefore less likely that these descriptions become reified into theories that are not nearly as fluid as the systems they describe.

*Researcher:* It seems, therefore, that these authors would view resilience as the creation of language and a meaning ascribed by an observer to a particular pattern of behaviour: it is through language that this construct which people define as existing independently comes into being. The value of such a view lies in the idea of theories as temporary lenses rather than representations of reality, with the primary aim of finding better ways of thinking about and describing phenomena. Once these lenses lose their usefulness, they may be discarded or adapted with time. Hence resilience may be viewed as one meaning ascribed to human behaviour, and should therefore be seen in context and in relative terms (truth as relative).

#### ...And others

*Researcher:* Anderson and Goolishian are not the only people who have come to the conclusion that giving primacy to meaning, subjectivity and discourse may present a useful alternative way of knowing.

*Family therapist:* True; David Paré (1995, p.3) notes that the field of family therapy “is increasingly directing its attention at the world of experience, the world we know”.

*Researcher:* “The world we know” is sure to provoke debate; if we are not careful, we may be caught up in the whole nature of reality polemic.

*Family therapist:* Maybe we can sidestep that issue by again quoting Paré (1995, p.6), who claims that the “pursuit of the understanding of how the world *is* becomes secondary to the preoccupation with the way we perceive, interpret and semantically construct it. Lived experience is regarded as the primary reality”.

*Researcher:* Hence the emphasis on language and culture as ways of knowing experience. So, in relating this to the study of resilience, I would say that the important thing is the use of this term as a language component and as a lens that is used to construct meaning within a given culture of ideas. Resilience is thus an interpretation of action.

Speaking of constructing meaning: do you think it is important to distinguish between constructivism and constructionism, given the furore it has created in the literature?

*Family therapist:* I think De Shazer (1991, p.76) provides a neat synthesis between these two positions in coining the phrase “interactional constructivism”. Paré (1995) goes on to explain this in pragmatic terms; he says that “while persons can be seen as processing data in accordance with their unique structures (constructivism), they share with others interpretations of the “text” of their experience [social constructionism]” (p.5).

*Researcher:* We have also mentioned “culture”, an important consideration in social constructionism which was not touched on in our discussions of

Maturana and Varela, and other constructivist thinkers. I am interested to know what cultures would encourage a discourse of resilience. What would the patterns, meanings and language of such a discourse be? Could we speak of a 'culture of resilience'? What would this entail? These are fascinating questions to which no answers exist as yet in the literature. To this end, I am reminded of the title of Nelson Goodman's (1978) book *Ways of Worldmaking*, which beautifully encapsulates the ideas that such studies could explore.

In looking at meanings and in considering resilience to be an interpretation of action, as we mentioned above, I am struck again by the implications that this holds. According to this view, researchers' version of the story is not considered more important than the system's story of itself. Gergen (1985, p.266) reminds us that "scientists have no greater claim to truth than anyone else", and I suspect that the neglect of everyone else has left rich pools of information untapped.

*Family therapist:* This is partly why people such as Michael White, David Epston, Tom Andersen and others have embarked on a narrative path in which they explore, enrich and validate the stories people have about themselves. However, the interplay between participants in a conversation cannot be ignored, since it is the "network of interdependent and continuously modifiable interpretations" (Gergen, 1985, p.63) that provide the anchor point for a conversation. This provides perhaps a meeting point between the ecosystemic and narrative approaches.

The ideas of the narrative therapists could be explored further; however, sufficient information has been gleaned from these interviews to come to some new conclusions about how resilience might be seen from various different perspectives. The following section summarises the findings of this chapter.

## Synthesis

This chapter explored the ideas of individual authors representing cybernetic, ecosystemic and postmodern paradigms which may be useful in providing a different approach to resilience. Writers from different developmental phases and schools in the family therapy tradition have been consulted. A discussion of the differences in their approaches and the various historical contexts of their work has been omitted in favour of a distillation of their ideas which might be relevant to a consideration of resilience. We have considered the work of thinkers as divergent as Auerswald, Maturana, Dell, Anderson and Goolishian, and a few others. We have looked at how they might regard resilience, as well as how they would go about a study of resilience.

The approach to the study of resilience that these authors might take may be summarised as follows:

	<i>Approach to resilience</i>	<i>Role of the observer</i>	<i>Role of language</i>
<b><i>Auerswald (Ecological view)</i></b>	Eventshape in timespace – behavioural patterns of systems across time and in context	Ecological detective who examines interactional patterns of person-in-context (interface between systems and context)	Reflects mechologic or ecologic thought systems; description as indicator of ecologic reality and relational aspects of situations
<b><i>Maturana and Dell (2<sup>nd</sup> order cybernetics)</i></b>	Structural coupling between individual and system; always in congruence; coherence between reciprocal interactional systems	Examine ontology of the observer who draws distinctions about resilience	Language brings forth objects; examine language in order to identify operations of distinction
<b><i>Anderson and Goolishian (Postmodern view)</i></b>	Ecology of meanings created in language	Participator in dialogue who co-creates meanings of resilience; interacts with others in linguistic systems	Language creates reality through attributions of meaning; these meanings are discovered through conversations

The most significant premises arising from this chapter are as follows:

- Resilience cannot be reduced to a single element; nor is it merely the sum of its parts (see Auerswald's definition of an implicate reality, p.45).
- Resilience cannot be considered divorced from the context of both the observer and the observed (see Auerswald's concept of timespace, p.46; Maturana's emphasis on the ontology of the observer, p. 51, and structural coupling, p.48; Dell's notion of coherence or fit, p.52; Hoffman and Varela's ideas of a conversational domain, p.54; and Varela's elucidation of an observer community, p.55).
- Contextualised truth and relativism were suggested by all the above authors as well as Anderson and Goolishian (p. 57).
- The postmodern authors (eg, Hoffman, Anderson & Goolishian) emphasise language as the vehicle for research and the "conversational domain" (Varela, p.54) in which resilience arises.
- Meaning is not absolute. It must be considered both from the point of view of the observer and the observed (Anderson & Goolishian, p.57; Hoffman, p.54).
- Description reflects meaning and attempts to encapsulate the complexities of situatedness and multidimensional phenomena referred to by Auerswald (p.45).

It is through a consideration of the information gained in Chapter 2, as well as the new ideas presented above, that a reconceptualisation of resilience and guidelines for its operationalisation will be considered in Chapter 4.



## CHAPTER 4

### RECONCEPTUALISING RESILIENCE

*All one's inventions are true, you can  
be sure of that. Poetry is as exact a  
science as geometry.*

— Gustave Flaubert

#### Introduction

This chapter has a twofold purpose. Firstly, based on the information discussed in the two theory chapters, this chapter will present ideas around a new conceptualisation of resilience, as well as guidelines as to how researchers may go about studying this concept (ie, the operationalisation of the construct). Secondly, implications of such a reconceptualisation for the field of resilience research as a whole will be considered. This is done in order to maintain a balanced perspective or metaview on the process of research. It is proposed that it is the constant reference to such a metaview that may prevent the field from being bogged down in the mire of content that may obscure the quest for understanding.

#### A Reconceptualisation of Resilience

In Chapter 2, an attempt was made to classify the heterogeneous definitions of resilience into four broad categories (namely, resilience as trait, process, developmental phenomenon and systemic phenomenon) in order to bring some conceptual clarity to the field. It became clear in this chapter that resilience is a term used to describe many different behaviours, and it was reported that resilience manifests in ways as diverse as the absence of pathology in high-risk children; the recovery of function in brain-injured patients; or the articulation of skills and knowledge in order to overcome adversity. This chapter also pointed out that the heterogeneity of definitions generates vastly different conclusions about the nature of resilience.

Thus, researchers assuming resilience to be a *trait or innate ability* (see Chapter 2, p.9), may define it as not succumbing to mental illness as a result of adversity (Miller, 1996). Other studies (eg, Freiberg, 1993) suggest that resilience is a *process* (see Chapter 2, p.11) by which people are able to mobilise resources in adversity. (In the extreme, this infers that even mental illness could constitute a way of mobilising resources and could therefore be seen as adaptive.) Those researchers (eg Egeland et al.) considering it to be a *developmental or life cycle phenomenon* (see Chapter 2, p.12) may define it as, for example, a capacity to survive that develops over time (Egeland et al., 1993). Yet others (eg, Butler, 1997; Walsh, 1996) see resilience as a *systemic phenomenon* (see Chapter 2, p.13) which occurs between people in particular contexts, and, as such, do not consider it to be something that exists 'within' a person. Still other researchers (eg, Cicchetti & Schneider-Rosen, 1986) acknowledge that it may well be a combination of inner resources and environmental elements which promotes survival.

In Chapter 3, the ideas of selected postmodern and cybernetic authors contributed several new possibilities for viewing resilience. Such ideas included the emphasis on the context of the observer, contextualised truths, the fit between observer and observed, the importance of language and meaning in considering resilience and a focus on description that aims to complexify rather than reduce information. According to various authors in Chapter 3, resilience could be considered as an ecological phenomenon which occurs between people and their worlds; the combination of an individual's behavioural coherence and the structural coherence of the system with which the individual couples; and a way of being in the world which can best be understood by exploring the experiences of those people. In addition, a conceptualisation of resilience need not be limited to individuals, but could be a useful term according to which larger systems can be described and understood (these include language systems, cultural systems, etc).

It is clear that the authors discussed in Chapter 3 would not conceive of resilience as a single "thing". Many of the studies mentioned in Chapter 2 (eg, Cicchetti & Schneider-Rosen, Chapter 2, p.11; Egeland, Chapter 2, p.12) may seem to concur with this. However, it is equally clear that a large number of the studies in Chapter 2 do attempt to reduce the various elements of resilience to constituent parts that make up the whole. This is contrary to the holistic, systemic perspectives of the authors explored in Chapter 3.

Should we condemn such diversity in the quest for a single, elemental definition? The principles of Newtonian science seem to suggest such a stance in their emphasis on reductionism and the pursuit of a single ultimate truth. In addition, the attitude which sees resilience as a “thing” that may be identified and examined in terms of its parts (metaphorically, possessing a particular “shape” and “size”) prevents the acceptance of a diversity of definitions which differ broadly (resilience as being all kinds of different “shapes” and “sizes” – an idea more acceptable to quantum than to Newtonian theories). However, reputable studies exist which empirically support the validity of all of these different shapes and sizes of resilience. The result is an apparent stalemate.

In a post-Newtonian paradigm, the diversity encountered in various definitions of resilience contributes to a richer understanding. It is only when researchers begin to bicker about whose definitions or approach is better, more scientific, or more accurate, that the field narrows as one ‘true’ definition is sought. It is significant, therefore, that a number of definitions presented in the literature are done so in the spirit of finally having found the fundamental missing element comprising resilience — the pot of gold at the end of the resilience rainbow.

I propose that it is not the variety of conceptualisations that is problematic, but the fact that each or any of them might be considered definitive and all-inclusive. In line with the postmodern idea of truth as relative, local and contextualised, it could be argued that there is no one truth, no final definition of resilience. In this way, these “pots of gold” represent various truths, all of them valid, and attempts to find the correct answer are futile. One implication of the idea of resilience as being something different for each context (and for each researcher) is that it is the observer who “creates” his or her own truth around the notion of what resilience is.

To surmise that resilience is purely the construction of an observer community is a perilous one. Resilience is a concept that thousands of survivors, laypersons and professionals identify with; and research does seem to detect a difference in the reactions of individuals (and groups) to adversity. It seems probable, therefore, that resilience as a behavioural phenomenon does indeed exist in some form (or several forms!) in the world out there. Let’s face it: some people do seem to manage better than others in the face of overwhelming odds. It seems

solipsistic to assume that resilience exists only in the eyes of the beholder; furthermore, the mere fact that so many people agree on its existence renders academic the question of its true nature. However, whether or not resilience actually “exists” as an independent concept is irrelevant, given that it cannot be divorced from the observer who looks for, reads about and writes up on this topic. Thus, a search for the true essence of resilience, separate from any context, seems a futile exercise.

**Rather, it might be more useful to conceptualise of resilience as occurring in the *interface* between the observer (and his/her context) and the observed (and its context) — in other words, as the synthesis between the objective and subjective multiverses. This, then, represents a reconceptualisation of resilience.**



**Figure 4.1. A reconceptualisation of resilience**

In practical terms, then, what does this mean?

- For one thing, we should embrace the richness that differing definitions allow, acknowledging that each one offers another strand in the colourful fabric of resilience. While we may not be able to conclusively define resilience in a few

words or even a few sentences, we are better able to intuitively understand what it is all about after having pored over the various contributions of researchers, writers and survivors themselves.

- This being said, it seems all the more important to add, rather than to reduce, voices to the literature on resilience. Again, such an approach correlates with the postmodern idea of embracing and increasing complexity and counters the Newtonian principle of reductionism. Consequently, the voices added from various thinkers in the family therapy field (see Chapter 3) should not be considered more important or better than those who have gone before. They are, however, important in that they offer different ideas on resilience.

Having granted that many conceptualisations are valuable, a word of warning follows: this does not imply that ‘anything goes’. In this respect several points are relevant.

- Firstly, it is imperative that conceptualisations ‘match’ the methods used in research. In other words, a *systemic coherence* should exist between definition and operationalisation. If this process is made explicit, this should facilitate readers’ understanding of the ways of thinking (or ways of worldmaking, as Goodman (1978) would say) behind researchers’ actions. By situating it in a definite *context*, research remains coherent, consistent and contextually valid.
- Secondly, the role of the researcher as *observer* should be highlighted. In so doing, the primacy of the observer’s assumptions in the formulation of a conceptualisation of resilience contributes to an understanding of that conceptualisation. Keeney (Hoffman, 1981, p.343) reminds us that “the therapist must never consider himself as an outside agent but rather as part of the therapeutic system”. The same applies to researchers and the research system. This confirms resilience as occurring in the *interface* where researcher and research subject meet; in other words, it exists as a function of the co-construction of researcher, research subject and context combined.

The relevance of these points, namely, systemic coherence, the role of the observer and resilience as interface, are taken further in a consideration of how we may go about researching resilience in a new way.

### **Operationalising Resilience in Research**

Gergen (1982, p.17) states that

one's actions appear to be vitally linked to the manner in which one understands or construes the world of experience... [T]he symbolic translation of one's experience vitally transforms their implications and thereby alters the range of one's potential reactions.

These words embrace a multitude of ideas. They are a reminder of the interrelation between conceptualisation and operationalisation; they suggest also the fundamental role played by language in the ways we study our world; and emphasise again the role of the observer in research. It is therefore inevitable that some of the ideas expressed in this section overlap considerably with those mentioned above; however, they bear repeating because they are relevant to the operationalisation of our ideas about resilience in research. From the main themes discussed in Chapter 3 (see Synthesis, p.60) and those expressed in the previous section, I have identified three main ideas which seem most pertinent to a new consideration of resilience research, namely, the role of language, the role of the observer, and the role of meaning and description.

#### The Role of Language

An important aspect highlighted in Chapter 2 was that the different conceptualisations of resilience seem to mould the ways in which research is done — or perhaps, and more likely, it is the other way around. In other words, the limitations imposed by the possibilities of research determine how resilience may be viewed. Simply put, it is not possible for a quantitative research study to construe resilience in complex subjective, descriptive terms. Neither is it possible for a case study to reveal a checklist of traits associated with resilient

people. The definition of resilience is therefore determined by the measures and methods used to study it. The way researchers choose to select their units of analysis not only influences the direction of their thinking, but also the actions they employ to solve their research problem (Efran et al., 1988). The issue underlying these observations was found to be the role of *language* in research. This was confirmed in Chapter 3, which suggested that our *language around a problem determines how the problem is seen*. Following Maturana (in Kenny, 1989), the language referents we use evoke the object of study. Unfortunately, no significant studies on resilience seem to examine the role of language in shaping our ideas on resilience and, consequently, the research we choose to use to give substance to these ideas. This means that researchers remain rooted in the content of their studies without an appreciation for the processes that shape them.

Is it possible to resolve this impasse? Possibly, a closer look at the way we as researchers language around a subject may provide the metaview which may resolve the inconsistencies and arguments which litter the field. The very existence of an interest in resilience arose as a result of its position as the opposite pole in the dialectic of health-pathology, in a world dominated by views of human behaviour couched almost purely in the language of pathology (for example, as Wolin and Wolin, (1993, p.13) point out, thinking of health as the absence of illness; using terms such as “asymptomatic”, “nonclinical”, and so on to describe normal behaviour). In response to Gregory Bateson’s exhortation to think about our thinking (Auerswald, 1987), it is possible that a similar consideration of where resilience is in terms of its own evolution may provide us with comparable insights.

Keeney and Morris (1985) put forward the significant notion that discoveries are guided by theory, rather than theories being discovered due to observation. These authors further suggest that we prescribe the distinctions we use in constructing a research reality. This brings to the fore the question of how we construct our theories. In answering this question, and again in following Bateson’s advice, it is necessary to look at the epistemologies upon which we base our constructions, as well as how we operationalise these constructions (descriptions) in undertaking research. The effect of paradigms and the influence of constructivist ways of thinking were touched upon in Chapter 3. The first and most fundamental aspect to be explored in such an examination must be the basic building block of academic discourse and the first line of drawing distinctions: language.

Chapter 3 discussed the importance of language, starting from the premise that it is through language that human beings know; and it is through this knowing that they are able to construct their world. People distinguish different units (including units for research) by drawing boundaries as they choose to do. In this study, for example, I have chosen to draw (essentially arbitrary) boundaries around the notions of resilience, paradigms, language, observer systems, and so on. The distinctions we make on the basis of paradigm are particularly interesting in terms of how language determines the limits of knowledge acquisition, and how we are confounded in the process by our lack of awareness of this process. The coexistence of two opposing paradigms (positivistic, mechanistic vs naturalistic, pluralistic) has caused much confusion, some of which Auerswald (1987) attributes to a failure to differentiate between these paradigms — in other words, a failure to identify our punctuations or note the distinctions that we draw in this respect. We have seen some of this confusion in the different results obtained in resilience research, and the different conceptualisations that have arisen around resilience. Problems arise when researchers remain unaware of their own epistemology and the influence of language and try to ‘fit’ nonpositivistic questions to a positivistic research framework, or when they sometimes revert to old paradigm thought while doing new paradigm work. The result, as seen in Chapter 2 and supported by Auerswald (1987), is a lack of fit or an incongruity in the results of such work.

The importance of consistency or fit, discussed in Chapter 3 with reference to Dell (Chapter 3, p.52) and Maturana (Chapter 3, p.46), is echoed here. It seems clear that the ‘fit’ between research actions and the descriptions we use to articulate these lies in the language of our own epistemology. According to the constructionist viewpoint, research cannot only be seen as an action or event, but rather as a “framework of activity and interpretation made possible by the shared language system in which we all operate” (Efran et al., 1988, p.29). As Anderson and Goolishian (1988) emphasised in Chapter 3 (p.56), and as Efran et al., (1990) repeat here, people ‘language’ their experiences in stories or narratives, but the way they use language also colours their experiences. This has implications not only for research, but for the ways people language about their own resilience.

In this study, the classification of research according to the assumptions or paradigms underlying researchers’ approaches offers clarity on the process of research, and partially



explains the different content found in studies. Knowing the observer's viewpoint (epistemology, paradigm, framework) allows the reader to interpret with added understanding the results of such work. An examination of language thus also gives us insight into the broader domain of the *observer*, and the latter's role in the conceptualisation — or creation — of the concept of resilience.

### The Role of the Observer

This brings us to the second point highlighted in Chapter 3; namely, *the role of the observer*. In the previous section, it was suggested that it is futile to search for a definition of resilience divorced from the observer who is intrinsically involved in the process of defining. Rather than accepting either extreme of resilience as a purely objective or subjective phenomenon, it seems useful to see researchers (including therapists, and, of course, not forgetting the survivors themselves) as creating *their own particular brand* of resilience. By this I mean that nobody — researcher or otherwise — approaches any subject without personal biases, assumptions and prejudices that colour their conceptions and determine their focus (see, for example, Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1994). These predetermined assumptions, together with the researchers' own sociocultural and sociohistorical *context*, as well as the context of the research milieu, shape the way they conceive of resilience. One could go so far as to say that resilience is conceptualised according to what the researcher believes or wants to find; as well as the context in which his or her study occurs. It is, to some extent, a function of our need to categorise and classify our world; a function of our need to make sense of people's behaviour. Van Rooyen (1995, p.23) claims that "our distinctions, if not carefully examined and acknowledged, will tend to confirm themselves".

This implies that, in order to understand resilience better, we need to look not only at that which is observed, but also at those who do the observing. This is in line with the ideas of Maturana discussed in Chapter 3. Furthermore, the context of the researcher should be considered no less relevant than the context of the research subject, as this is what determines the way in which the researcher "structurally couples" with the research subject. It is through the "fit" between researcher and research subject that resilience is created (see the discussion on Maturana and Dell in Chapter 3, pp.48-53).

Such a perspective may also go some way towards explaining the differences in conceptualisations of resilience presented to us by researchers thus far. According to such a view, *resilience can be considered to be that which arises in the interface between the observer and his/her context and that which is observed*. This conceptualisation may be applied both to research on resilience as well as to resilient people or systems themselves. It stands to reason, therefore, that any study of resilience will reveal only a partial truth when the observer is omitted from the equation. It is possible that this is what has happened in research to date, explaining why such varying conceptions of resilience exist. How the researcher is to be included in studies is open to debate; however, the postmodern school would suggest that one way would be to include the observer as a participant in research, conveying a sense of this ‘interface’ between observer and observed through, possibly, the use of descriptive methods.

### The Role of Meaning and Description

Chapter 3 offered a third important idea to be considered in a reconceptualisation of resilience. This is the notion of the importance of *meaning which is discovered through rich description* (see, for example, Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Auerswald, 1990; Hoffman, 1998). A focus on description over explanation may be applied not only to investigating people’s behaviour, but may be put to use in evaluating and re-evaluating the field itself, in an attempt to maintain a metaperspective on resilience. This would correspond with Keeney and Morris’ (1985) idea of research as a re-examination (re-search) of a subject. Description prevents reification and encourages flexibility and openness in research, partly because description does not present an attempt to explain something — in other words, to make a phenomenon ‘fit’ into some understandable classification system. In this respect, the words of Boscolo and Cecchin (in Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman & Penn, 1987, p. 115) come to mind: “We don’t have a theory because a theory is to have a fixed hypothesis about how the family should be. We don’t know how it should be”. Substituting the words “the family” with “resilience”, this is sobering advice indeed. Accepting that there is no “blueprint” for resilience, but that it is in fact a different experience for every survivor and researcher (and the unique coupling of these two), it seems more informative to try to learn about these various experiences and the commonalities and differences between them than to search for a theory about how resilience ‘should be’.

Another way of looking at the issue of description versus explanation is to say that the one represents an attempt to convey an implicate reality (for example, case studies, qualitative studies and personal narratives, which are usually mainly descriptive), while the other situates resilience in an explicate reality (for example, quantitative studies which conform to a world view in which constituent parts add up to a logical whole) (see the discussion on Auerswald in Chapter 3, p.45). This discussion highlights the importance of exploring the contexts which bring forth resilience, including sociohistorical contexts in timespace. This should be done in an attempt to understand the implicate reality of resilience rather than the scientific, reductionistic explicate reality which has dominated resilience research thus far. One way of doing this is to draw on nonscientific sources of information, since an understanding of implicate reality is, according to Auerswald (1990), more readily found in art and poetry than scientific writings. This confirms my own experience, which has been that the books and articles on resilience which contained arguably the most valuable information and understanding were in fact those who did not resort to statistics or questionnaires to illustrate their positions, but which gave a narrative account of people's lives and experiences. In fact, one book I consulted is dedicated solely to the poetry of survivors as the vehicle for understanding their resilience (see Lazar, Kidd & Wawrytko, 1985).

It may seem that in praising description over explanation, quantitative, linear or Newtonian studies are condemned. This is not the case. It has been mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation that it is the balance and complementary information provided by both approaches, as well as by views from a number of paradigms, that allows us a broader perspective on the subject. However, it seems necessary to emphasise the benefits of the lesser explored but promising avenues permitted by the postmodern schools of thought, in the light of the paucity of literature in this vein.

### **Re-searching Resilience: Conclusions and Recommendations**

In summary, then, a reconceptualisation of resilience hinges on a few pertinent points. These include a view of resilience as a multitude of phenomena, rather than a single, unified, truth; the importance of maintaining a metaview when embarking upon a study of resilience; resilience as occurring in the interface between observer system, observed system and the

contexts of both; and, flowing from this, the importance of the role of the observer in resilience studies. In addition, postmodern research methods, and particularly an emphasis on description, were proposed both as a means of unlocking a new field of enquiry and overcoming some of the limitations and stalemates encountered in “old paradigm” research.

It is important to remember, however, that these views are not necessarily right, nor are they better than the approaches examined in Chapter 2. They are merely different. Cecchin and his colleagues (Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1993) remind us that these views are equally valid as all others and should be examined or evaluated in terms of their usefulness in a particular context. In accordance with Cecchin’s ideas of irreverence (Cecchin, 1992; Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1992), we should reserve the right to apply those lenses which are most useful to our study and most conducive to understanding. This, too, adheres to the principles of flexibility and openness suggested by this study in order to avoid the reification of resilience.

The elements that we have come to consider important in an enquiry into resilience resonate with the findings that naturalistic or “new paradigm” researchers have made in the field. Because these findings support and seem to validate the conclusions reached in this study, I have included them here. Very briefly, a few of these principles are set out below:

- (1) Research is a task of re-examining (re-searching) what we have done to construct a particular reality (Keeney & Morris, 1985).
- (2) The meanings and interpretations ascribed to the gathered information is the result of negotiations between the researcher and collaborators. Researchers are actually busy reconstructing their constructions of reality and must continually check their understanding with that of their co-researchers (the research “subjects”) (Guba & Lincoln, 1988).
- (3) Observers or researchers must be aware of their own patterns of response and examine their own assumptions or prejudices (Cecchin et al., 1994).

- (4) Inductive information analysis is preferable because it gives the researcher access to the multiple realities that can be found in the gathered information (Guba & Lincoln, 1988). Ideas on research avoid reification through remaining open and flexible.
- (5) The negotiated outcome of a research study should lead to thick descriptions and thus a better understanding of the phenomenon under study, which results in the discovering of theory and adds to our system of knowledge (Moon, Dillon & Sprenkle, 1990). The emphasis is on description rather than explanation.
- (6) There is a focus on local, contextualised truths and value systems rather than globalisations and general theory (the dominant discourse) (Moon et al., 1990).
- (7) The primacy of relationships and the construction of meaning is cardinal (Keeney & Ross, 1992).

To recap: the reconceptualisation proposed here conceives of resilience as a multifaceted, complex phenomenon occurring in the interface between observer systems and observed systems. Such a reconceptualisation holds several implications for the field of resilience research. It has already been mentioned that the ideal of finding one single, inevitable truth surrounding the nature and functioning of resilience must be relinquished. This is an ideal which is fundamental to the tradition of empiricism, and will require researchers to question the very basis of their methods and results. Quantitative information, while providing useful insights, cannot, in itself, accommodate the diversity and complexity of differing truths and perceptions of resilience. Qualitative information is equally limited in that results cannot be generalised and are not easily describable or statistically verified. Both are acceptable *as long as* the role of the observer (assumptions, aims and own situatedness) is included as an integral aspect of the study. This will provide a context for the research which will allow the results to be interpreted and understood in a meaningful light.

Therefore, a new approach will compel researchers to question their own assumptions and ideals in research. For example, what is our point of departure for investigations into

resilience? What are our aims regarding the implementation of our knowledge? If our aim is to make the lives of people better, are we doing so? Or is our interest largely academic? Such an approach also suggests that research itself is an intervention: after all, the very act of interviewing people about their own resilience (or lack thereof) cannot fail to impact upon them.

Recommendations for future research therefore include the following:

- More research on resilience is needed which emanates from cybernetic, ecosystemic, and postmodern paradigms, and research which examines the language referents that shape our thinking.
- More research on resilience should seek to describe, rather than to explain, this construct. To this end, narrative accounts by survivors themselves should be encouraged.
- The way resilience is conceptualised should be consistent with its operationalisation (research methods “match” definitions).
- Research should be contextualised. In other words, the researcher’s aims and motives in undertaking a study should be made explicit; and the socioeconomic and sociocultural context in which the study occurs should be explained.
- The researcher’s own assumptions about resilience and resilience research, as well as an awareness of the paradigms to which he or she subscribes, should be examined in an attempt to attain a metaview on the study.

### **Defects in the Study**

This study was purely theoretical, and did not attempt to illustrate the proposals made with fieldwork of any kind. Hence, the usefulness and validity of the ideas presented could not be confirmed. In addition, the study did not consider implications of using this concept in the

practice of psychotherapy. This is a defect in the sense that the basis for my ideas on resilience were drawn from the family therapy field rather from writings about research *per se*, and, as such, might be deemed to be more relevant to an implementation of resilience in therapy than in research. Furthermore, as a psychotherapist myself, such considerations might have been useful for my own practice and for the practice of other therapists whose interest lies in working with resilience. As it stands, therapists must deduce such implications for themselves.

The literature study (Chapter 2) cannot be considered comprehensive or exhaustive. A great deal of literature exists on the subject and, due to the nature of this dissertation of limited scope and other constraints (for example, I was unable to obtain some important literature which the Unisa library did not possess), I have possibly omitted various important writings. Furthermore, the division of the literature into themes may create confusion. Such a division was designed to organise the literature in an understandable and meaningful way, but this is an essentially arbitrary division which may consequently contain some overlaps and omissions.

The purpose of the theory chapter (Chapter 3) was to present ideas which might be valid in a reconceptualisation of resilience. Owing to the demands of brevity and conciseness expected from a dissertation of limited scope, the chapter did not aim to give a complete, in-depth overview of the field of family therapy. Therefore, large portions of the family therapy literature which might be considered relevant to the study were not included. Nor did this chapter explore these ideas in great depth, or include all aspects of the ideas these authors have written about. This was done (with some difficulty!) for many reasons, including brevity and conciseness.

My reconceptualisation of resilience dealt more with approaches to research on resilience than with resilience as a phenomenon itself. It could be argued that any construct could be substituted for “resilience” using the same arguments. Nonetheless, my conclusions and the findings presented evolved out of my interaction with the theory and literature, and in order to be true to this, I persisted in spite of necessarily veering away from a close investigation of resilience itself as a behavioural phenomenon.

The style of writing used in the dissertation may be criticised in that various styles ranging from theoretical, strictly academic discourse to informal dialogues to a personal narrative (as follows in Chapter 5) were used. This may be seen as a clumsy muddle of styles. However, the style of writing reflects the process of my thinking and the evolution of my ideas on resilience and research and should be approached as such.

This section has dealt with defects in this study, many of which naturally arise as a result of the context of the researcher. The role and context of the researcher has been pointed out in various places in this dissertation as an important factor in research. A consideration of this therefore deserves some attention.

### **Irreverence and Reflexivity: In Four-Wheel Drive**

Cecchin (1992) claims that it is impossible not to take a stand, but that by remaining self-reflexive and maintaining a sense of perspective by situating oneself in a context, it is possible to rise above the pitfalls associated with proclaiming one's beliefs. Such a pitfall, is of course, the danger that we come to believe too strongly in the 'rightness' of our own views, with the result that we reify our ideas of resilience and decontextualise our research. Cecchin (1992) states that remaining self-reflexive and sensitive to context "also permits the therapist [and researcher] to achieve that healthy state of mild irreverence towards his or her own 'truths' no matter how much hardship it took to conquer them" (p.93).

In view of all this, it is therefore imperative to adopt an irreverent stance towards resilience, otherwise the danger exists that resilience will be reified into some concrete entity, especially in the light of the scientific nature of research. One way to get around this is to use postmodern research methods (as mentioned above), given that these examine language and the observer system; however, people can still reify postmodernism. A safeguard proposed by this study may be to remain focussed on the observer's role and, as researchers and readers, remain self-reflexive and open to debate about the nature of our own beliefs. This pertains equally to this study and I, as author, cannot afford to get too reverent about resilience, or to believe too strongly in its existence external to myself. Dell (in Hoffman, 1981) points out that



“as long as we are aware that we are always operating in the context of a self-recursive network, it does not matter what epistemologies we use or what theories we adopt” (p.344).

So, in terms of the metaphor of travel I have used, self-reflexiveness (and the irreverent stance that comes with it) may well be the “four-wheel drive” which gets us out of the mud and potholes inherent in all research, but especially in research which looks at a topic as intangible as resilience. This idea deserves a closer look, and will be investigated in the chapter that follows.

***PART II***  
***RESILIENCE AND REFLEXIVITY***

## CHAPTER 5

### LOOKING IN THE LOOKING GLASS

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

— T S Elliot  
“Little Gidding”

#### Introduction

The assumptions and biases that I have introduced to this study form an integral part of my research. The views represented here have been chosen by someone who does not approach the study of resilience as a *tabula rasa*, but with her own ideas about resilience, formed over many years in which the idea of resilience has taken on a personal meaning of some description. This holds true for all researchers and, as such, colour every investigation on resilience. Van Rooyen (1995, p.18) avers that “therapists develop therapeutic models and approaches that fit with their own interactional styles, resources and beliefs”. The same holds true for researchers. A comprehensive understanding of any investigation into resilience is therefore incomplete without some insight into the world of the researcher — in other words, what does the researcher understand by the concept of resilience as informed by his or her own life? If we accept that there is no such thing as a scientific, objective stance in research, then what are the biases and assumptions that researchers bring to the process of research? In an attempt to answer these questions, this chapter addresses the world of the researcher in this study and the interface or fit between researcher and research topic. In this way, hopefully the ideas presented on resilience in these pages will take on a deeper meaning for the reader who will be able to understand this reconceptualisation of resilience in context.

## My Story

I have mentioned in the first chapter that the concept of resilience attracted me because of its emphasis on salutogenesis, health and strengths, as opposed to the more negative focus on damage. When I first decided to make resilience the focus of my research, I did not stop to think about what exactly it was that pushed my buttons about the idea of not succumbing to, adversity.

At this time I was in my first year of the MA Clinical Psychology course at Unisa, and filled with enthusiasm and a strong ambition to achieve, both in my professional and personal development. In line with Unisa's teaching approach, we were being encouraged to reflect upon our own lives, and one of my lecturers made a passing remark about how my chosen topic may be related to resilience in my own life. However, in the context of my achievements and ambition, both in the present and the past, I could not really relate to this. I have had what I considered to be a happy and healthy childhood and youth, and had achieved highly in school and university in a number of fields. My family was close and secure, and, although like all families we had experienced various tough times, I did not consider the difficulties we encountered to constitute the truly adverse conditions that I felt were necessary in order to label a person or family as resilient. In reflecting on my family's history and its cross-generational patterns, however, I identified a few themes which I felt might be called resiliencies, and which I assumed that I would continue.

For example, my mother had often mentioned to me that the women on both sides of the family were "the strong ones". It became a theme to me to believe that my female ancestors (including my mother) were "strong women" who would survive any hardship and keep the family together always. My belief in this was reinforced by family stories which illustrated how these women had endured difficult lives, dealing with poverty, war, unemployment, miscarriages and alcoholism in the family with perfect equanimity and grace, retaining always their lovely manners and pride in their beautiful homes and personal and family achievements. My mother herself had proved this in various ways through her own ability to deal with adversity while managing to excel in a demanding career. Without realising it, presenting a competent front to the world became very important to me. In so doing, I too would make the family proud as a strong, achieving woman and continue the tradition.

My intense experiences during my internship at Sterkfontein Hospital, which upset my equilibrium and threatened to topple me completely, therefore came as a shock. I had been warned that the internship year was a difficult one, but I had confidence that I, strong, competent person that I was, would make the most of the experience, dealing with crises in the same way that I and my mother and grandmothers had — competently and efficiently. I attempted to convince myself that the devastating suicide of one of my patients, the cruel death of my beloved cat, a car accident which injured my husband and destroyed our car, constant, serious financial problems, pressure to finish my dissertation, and the many provocations presented by the hospital context could best be dealt with if I assumed a rational, calm — and always competent — approach. Anything less would be failure. My supervisor at the hospital, however, disagreed. And so began a painful journey, in which I have come to reconsider my ideas about resilience and my motivations for choosing a topic which deals so intimately with the issue of overcoming suffering.

On my supervisor's recommendation, I entered therapy. It was in this context that I was confronted with the paradoxical idea that coping and competence can also be pathological, and that always appearing happy and in control was not a sign of resilience and inner strength, but of brittleness, which, when the pressure became too much, would cause me to shatter completely. I was a prime case for professional burnout, I was told repeatedly. The only way to save myself was to allow myself to 'break down' and admit that I could not face every ordeal with emotionless stoicism. I had to learn to ask for help, to reveal that I was not a superwoman. I had to fail in order to survive.

What my therapist was suggesting that I do was to plumb the depths of my emotional despair; and, worse than this, to share it with others in order that they might not assume that I was fine when I was not. I needed to struggle in order that people could help me and so that I, as a therapist, could understand the struggles of others and so help them. I was torn between knowing that my therapist was right and feeling that I was betraying the legacy of my family and, to some extent, my role in it. I knew that my parents and siblings would not understand this process, especially since intellectualism was always favoured over 'hysterical' displays of emotion. But somehow I found a way to dare with the help of my therapist, my husband (who endured my miserable tears and disconsolate ravings with unwavering patience)

and with support and guidance from my supervisors at Sterkfontein. I found strength in little, unexpected ways — my yoga teacher, a grandmotherly figure who drew me to her through her warmth, would speak little mantras of self-care and acceptance and preach gentleness and love for oneself, which I held onto as tiny treasures in a time when I despised myself for my “weakness”.

It is still (and I think will always be) incredibly difficult for me to allow myself to fully feel and share the debilitating effects of sadness, despair and hopelessness. The legacy of not breaking down, of remaining ever competent, of coping, runs very deep. I am still sometimes, perhaps, more brittle than bendable. But there is hope, and there is help, and I am not alone in my struggle. What is more, I believe that I have grown immeasurably as a therapist, and, for the first time, am able to share tears with patients and not become irritated and impatient with those who dare to show me their own incompetence. I have a hundred doubts about myself, and many old pretences and defences which prevent me from embracing my own vulnerability, but the journey, and the learning, continues. And it is in this knowledge, and in the proof of my own imperfect resilience, that I go on.

### **My Personal Definition of Resilience**

My personal definition of resilience is merely one of many; and while it is as valid as any, it cannot be presented as the definitive, or even a definitive, conceptualisation. In line with Cecchin's (1992) injunction, it is important that I take responsibility for my convictions and situate them in a cultural context, which I hope I have done in the above brief description. It is also important to

make clear that these convictions are not a truth independent of the observer and the context but are the result of ethical standards which stem from the [researcher's] personal history, cultural context, and theoretical observation. (Cecchin, 1992, p.93).

Bearing these injunctions in mind, then, the following is a discussion of my personal view of resilience. The previous section implied that my understanding of resilience at the outset

of my research focussed more on the notion of being invulnerable to pain, and on strength as a means of keeping out the influences of hardship. The definition of resilient people as “superkids” (see Chapter 1, p.5) is relevant here. Also relevant is the emphasis on not failing as a definition of resilience, where a descent into emotional turbulence and the despair that comes with it is seen as not being able to cope and therefore as a lack of resilience. Inherent in this is the belief that the presence of a psychiatric disorder is proof of a person’s lack of resilience. However, it seems as if such a view reflects not resilience but brittleness, as I pointed out in the previous section.

My readings on resilience, and my own experiences in the past few years, including the therapy that has played an important part in my personal and professional development, led me to a final understanding of resilience which embraces many ideas which have been reflected in the literature. One of these is the notion of being affected by turmoil but being able to make sense of painful experiences or use them to grow into a productive person. In this respect, Flach’s (1988) definition, which emphasises how resilient people experience fully the painful disorganisation and emotional tumult of a crisis, was particularly pleasing to me. I found it essential to see resilient people as being sensitive, rather than immune, to hardship, because it is this sensitivity that also allows them to redirect pain to productive and artistic ends.

This naturally led me to question definitions of resilience which exclude people who suffer from psychiatric illnesses. It seems just possible that a descent into madness is, for some, a necessary process in order to escape damaging environments, to mobilise help and to discover hidden strengths and resources. It should not be assumed that resilient people do not need help; indeed, the act of seeking help is a resilient one. Naturally, not all mentally ill people can be called resilient; but the presence of such illness should not exclude them from its definition.

Language became an important factor in my definition of resilience, not only because of its emphasis in my training, but also because of my experience of the role of conversations which allowed me to discover (or create) my own resilience. It was through conversations with supervisors, colleagues, therapist, and in the internal dialogue provoked by this research that I came to my own insights and understanding about resilience. My awareness of different paradigms as products and determinants of thought and the effort of achieving an overview of

the field further exposed me to the influence of words. Furthermore, my informal efforts to explore the resiliencies of my clients and patients over the last few years, using reframing, different types of questions, and encouraging patients to story around their own strengths, also illustrated the power of the terms we use to describe our worlds; and how I, as a therapist, could “create” resilience in my clients by making them aware of their strengths through my use of language. Hence, in a personal definition of resilience, I feel the importance of including the role of language which makes people punctuate certain behaviours in a way which may be labelled “resilient”.

Description became central in this process and in the process of my own therapy. I discovered that description gave more personal meaning to stories and allowed me a greater intuitive understanding and insight into resilience — both my own and others’ — than the many quantitative studies that I had perused at length. Although these were interesting and gave me ideas about what to look for, it was in the holistic description of people’s lives that things fell into place and a sense of the whole — the bigger picture — was achieved. Consequently, a personal definition of resilience is one which does not seek to reduce this concept to a single sentence.

My emphasis on context emanates as a result of this and also — again — as a result of my own experience. I do not experience myself in isolation. It stands to reason, therefore, that I cannot hope to understand others by ignoring the contexts in which they operate. My interest and training in ecological approaches to therapy naturally correlate with this view — as a cause or result or both! Through dialogue with others I realise how difficult it is for me to see the larger context of my own life, which alerted me to the importance of self-reflection, which brings perspective. A personal definition of resilience therefore includes a consideration of resilience in context. In the previous section I referred to a number of contexts — family of origin, my present family life, my student world, my world as an intern psychologist at a psychiatric hospital, the world of therapy, and so on — which shaped my beliefs and views of myself. While in this chapter I have essentially considered resilience in relation to myself and therefore as an individual thing (although I also described resilience as developing through dialogue and interaction with others), an emphasis on systems and context presupposes that resilience may also be applied to other systems, such as families, communities, societies or even



formal organisational structures. The importance I attach to context, as reflected in my own story, is succinctly expressed by Goodman (1978, pp.2-3):

If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say?

Regarding the type of study that I chose to do, the emphasis in my life on intellectualism naturally made me favour a conceptual and essentially theoretical dissertation. At the outset, my ambition drove me to find that elusive common denominator of resilience that would lead us to a better, if not final, understanding of the topic under examination. My background and training in family systems theory, and the paucity of literature on resilience in this vein, convinced me that this was the way to go. A systemic consideration of resilience was sure, I felt, to point us in a new and promising direction. Instead, I was confronted with the inescapable idea of constructivism. That really upset my plans. This is not to say, of course, that a systemic view of resilience does not hold promise; on the contrary, it could indeed provide a different angle on the subject, which is, as I have mentioned in a previous chapter, an important aim in resilience research. However, I was not content to stop at that, when so much has happened in the field since then, and so many fascinating new ideas permit exploration into areas of research where researchers, until recently, have not trod. I was also attracted by Keeney's (1983) idea of making research aesthetic and not merely pragmatic, and was impressed by Allman's (1982, p.43) assertion that I might be "like the artist searching for a beauty and unity of structure. It is through that aesthetic process that flexibility and differentiation are best furthered". However, in the course of this work, and while the events referred to in the previous section were unfolding, I became more dissatisfied with pure theory, feeling that it was divorced from the experience which I was becoming more aware of and which was teaching me such difficult but valuable lessons. This final chapter is in some small way an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice, albeit a very inadequate one.

Thus it happens that personal beliefs, my own experiences and my training mould my personal definition and my conceptualisation of resilience. And so my dissertation has found its own coherence in the fit between researcher and research topic.

## Prejudices, Biases and Assumptions in this Research

Cecchin et al. (1994, p.8) define prejudices as

all the sets of fantasies, ideas, accepted historical facts, accepted truths, hunches, biases, notions, hypotheses, models, theories, personal feelings, moods, unrecognized loyalties — in fact, *any* pre-existing thought that contributes to one's view, perceptions... and actions...

These authors go on to say that we cannot operate without prejudices, which reveal themselves implicitly in our everyday interactions. Another blow to researchers who consider themselves to be objective in their research, the up-side of this idea is that prejudices are not necessarily 'bad'. Rather, they are inevitable; and, indeed, may only prevent us from truly exploratory thinking if we remain oblivious to them. Consequently, in order to evaluate our research and to situate it in context, it is imperative to make our prejudices overt.

Many of the biases and assumptions inherent in this study have been mentioned in the previous section, and so it remains merely to list them a little more explicitly.

An obvious bias is in favour of ecological and systemic models, which is naturally due to my training and knowledge of this field. Connected to this is a somewhat unfortunate bias against pure empiricism and the Newtonian tradition, for the same reason. Although I have mentioned that a consideration of resilience from alternative viewpoints does not detract from the importance of traditional research (see Chapter 4, p.73), the flavour of the dissertation does seem to tend towards a preference for postmodern ideas. Inherent in postmodernism is another bias, namely, my liking for description and narrative approaches, which is again due to a combination of my training and experiences. I have also imposed my view of reality as relative upon this discussion, and many of the arguments expressed reflect this assumption.

On another level, we could list biases associated with the very process of researching resilience. For example, it is an assumption that resilience is a valid area of research and worth

the pains of researching and writing a dissertation. It is an assumption that resilience exists at all, since our “proofs” of it are merely behaviours to which we append the label “resilient”. The basis for my assumptions of this nature lies in my belief in the interplay between health and illness, and in my distaste of a pathology-obsessed psychology. They also find their origin in my experience that people are able to mediate the knocks that life metes out to them in various ways. Underlying these assumptions are yet more biases regarding the needs of people – for example, that they need assistance, guidance, that resilient people need a different approach to non-resilient people, and so on. In addition, another assumption that affects the way I approach resilient people and the study of resilience is the idea that resilience is either an outcome or a resource. My bias in this direction is not explored in this study, although I suspect it comes into play in my work as a psychotherapist who seeks to identify and mobilise resources.

In looking at the conceptualisation of resilience that I have designed, it would also seem, however, that I see this concept as being socially constructed (primarily) by the research community. This assumption has shaped my writings quite considerably in that I have, on the basis of such an assumption, had to refrain from drawing any definite conclusions or presenting a firm, clear definition of resilience.

## Conclusion

This chapter attempted to put into practice the suggestions of self-reflexiveness and irreverence proposed in the previous chapter. In line with the emphasis on the role of the observer highlighted in this dissertation, this chapter gave a brief but personal account of the researcher’s prejudices, personal interest in and ideas about resilience. The researcher’s personal experience of resilience was traced and related to her conceptualisation of this construct. The assumptions and biases which shaped her thinking were then discussed in terms of personal and professional contexts. This chapter aimed to show how situating the themes of this study in a sociohistorical and sociocultural context could promote a better understanding of the perspectives and approaches advocated. This in turn allows the reader and other researchers to interpret and apply the information in this document in a more meaningful and coherent manner.

## EPILOGUE

My initial focus in writing this dissertation was to examine resilience with a view to proposing a model by which researchers and practitioners could explore this concept, given the plethora of approaches that abound in the field and the clear need for a coherent conceptualisation of resilience. However, my encounter with the theory presented in Chapter 3 alerted me to a number of points that vote against reifying resilience into a “thing”, which a model might succeed in doing. There is also a suggestion that resilience *per se* might not exist at all, but is merely a distinction drawn by an observer. Furthermore, the natural tendency of readers to zealously adopt a model and make all of their observations fit into that particular framework (Van Rooyen, 1995) could perhaps frustrate another point stressed in Chapter 3, namely, the importance of remaining flexible, decrying reification and promoting dialogue in the examination and description of resilience. Another argument came from the perspective of an epistemology which proposes description rather than explanation, in which the construction of a model contains the danger of reducing a complex phenomenon to a simple set of quantifiers. All in all, it seemed that the construction of a model of resilience was not an appropriate or useful development at this point in resilience research. I resolved this difficulty by presenting instead a more fluid and flexible reconceptualisation of resilience, together with suggestions for how to go about studying resilience in future.

The reconceptualisation that I have proposed in this dissertation is not presented as a replacement for or even an alternative to other studies on resilience. Rather, it is an attempt to augment or enhance future resilience studies. In addition, although this dissertation does not deal directly with ways of conceptualising resilience in the practice of psychotherapy or give suggestions for other interventions (eg, public and community health programmes), the principles mentioned here may be used by practitioners as guidelines in their work. Hopefully, this work will provide people with a better understanding both of the concept of resilience and of the ways we have gone about thinking about it. In closing, the words of Goodman (1978, p.22) provide a fitting end to this study: “ Such growth in knowledge is not by formation or fixation or belief but by the advancement of understanding”.

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